FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

Frontier Stories

FALL 1944 20¢

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OF PIONEER

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE ADVENTURES OF THE DAUNTLESS MEN AND WOMEN WHO CARVED A NEW EMPIRE—THE WEST

CAPTAIN TOMAHAWK

A NOVEL OF REDSKIN AMBUSH AND LONG RIFLE MIGHT . . . By

TOM W. BLACKBURN

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Frontier Stories

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Jay and his men fired at the flitting figures beyond the wall of flame.

FREIGHTERS, WEST!

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

THE dust was six inches thick on Fremont Street in Nebraska City, and a man was having his face ground into it. Jay Brandon listened to his scream of pain as the bullwhacker in the tattered corduroy trousers lifted a heavy boot and thumped it into the beaten man's ribs.

There had been three others in the fight originally when they'd pulled the old teamster from the seat of the big Murphy wagon and battered him into the dust.

Immaculate in the gray beaver, black frock coat and polka-dot cravat, Jay had watched from the door of the Emperor

As the flames subsided, they charged to the high-pitched Arapahoe yell.

Nebraska City was the hottest town on earth. Missouri River steamers piled the wharves high with goods—but it would take real men—and maybe miracles—to roll the stuff to the fort in the Sioux country.

A Complete Novel of the Bullwhacker Brigade

Saloon. Two of the attackers had desisted with the teamster on his knees, leaving the finishing touches to the red-haired, red-whiskered bullwhacker in the brown corduroys. The bullwhacker was a powerful, brutish man, with thick sensuous lips and small pig's eyes. He enjoyed his task.

Jay Brandon tossed the cigar into the gutter, flicked the dust from the lapel of the coat, and then pushed his way through the silent crowd. He came up behind the red-haired man as the bullwhacker was lifting his boot again. Catching him by the left arm, he whirled him around and

smashed a heavy fist into his gaping face.

The bullwhacker staggered back through the crowd. Blood trickled from his split lips as he sat down against the wheel of the Murphy.

"Come again?" Jay grinned. He handed the beaver to the nearest spectator and then slipped out of the coat. He stood out in the center of the circle, a lean dark-haired man, gray-eyed, long-jawed.

"Comin' plenty, mister," the bullwhacker grunted, climbing to his feet. He plodded forward, huge fists balled and hairy, the hatred written across his wide face.

Jay waited for him, eyes shifting to the two men who had been in the fight at the beginning. He watched the beaten teamster crawl through the crowd on hands and knees, shaking his head stupidly.

The bullwhacker rushed suddenly, lashing out with his right fist and trying to drive his man to the ground. Jay Brandon stepped forward. Again his hard-knuckled hand snapped out, this time catching the bullwhacker in the bridge of the nose and breaking it cleanly.

The gore gushed out as he tottered forward, screaming with the pain. His two friends had shifted positions and were coming up on either side of Jay.

The smaller, a stocky, bald-headed man in a dirty buckskin shirt and leggins, plunged forward at Jay's knees.

"Get him, Grady!" the other chap yelled shrilly.

Jay grinned. He danced back lightly and then brought his right foot up with all the force he could muster. The point dug into the short man's stomach, knocking the wind from him. He gasped once and then lay on his face shivering, digging stubby fingers into the dust.

The bullwhacker with the broken nose was still up and full of fight. Tears coursed down his cheeks as he lunged in again.

The third man, a rangy chap in blue-flannel shirt and flat-crowned teamster's hat, rushed in from the other side. Jay danced in between the two of them as the crowd yelled in appreciation.

He straightened up suddenly and rushed the third man against the wagon, hitting him half a dozen times in the face with lightning-like blows before stepping away to meet the red-head again.

The hatchet-faced man in the blue shirt sank down to the ground and came up with a length of iron chain in his hand. Jay rammed a fist into the bullwhacker's stomach, doubling him up. He kicked him in the right kneecap, knocking him to the ground and putting him out of the fight.

The remaining battler stepped forward swinging the chain around his head. Jay moved back grimly. That rusted chain slashed across his face could take away his eyesight.

HE tensed himself for a sudden spring in under the steel whip. It was unnecessary. A rather thin, light-haired man in the buckskin outfit of an army post scout lifted a heavy .44 calibre Walker Dragoon Colt and pointed it at the other man's chest.

"Drop it, friend," he said quietly.

The man in the blue shirt eyed him coldly, the chain dangling in his hand. Jay Brandon saw him weigh his chances. They were about eight feet apart, the stranger standing in the front line of the circle.

"This thing shoots fast, mister," the stranger in buckskin observed. "Don't try to beat it."

Jay looked at him closely. He was dressed in the frontier style, but he didn't speak like a backwoodsman. His words were clipped, Eastern rather than Western. He had cold blue eyes and a small straight mouth.

The man with the chain laughed and then tossed the object aside.

"Finish the fight, gentlemen," the newcomer murmured laconically.

Jay Brandon was waiting for the next rush. The brawlers on the frontier all fought the same way, and they were quite surprised when a man came into them with straight-driving fists instead of backing away. The force of their own drive added power to Jay's punches.

Slowly, he backed his man against the wagon and hit him till he dropped into the dirt. Stepping back, he looked at his bleeding knuckles.

The teamster who had been beaten was back on the wagon seat, lashing at his animals with a long blacksnake whip. The big Murphy trundled away to the other end of town. Jay saw the word *EXCELSIOR* written in two-foot letters on the side of the dirty white canvas.

He turned to the man with the gun. "You drink, mister?" he asked.

"After you," the stranger said.

The crowd yelled and slapped Jay's back as he retrieved his clothing and walked back toward the Emperor.

"Name's Brandon," he said. "Just in from Denver. They say Nebraska City's the hottest town on earth." Coming in on the stage, he'd seen the long lines of bull outfits pulling out for the frontier posts; acres of warehouses and stockyards had been constructed on the outskirts of the city. Wharves and levies along the Missouri were strewn with great piles of merchandise destined for the interior. The steamers carried materials from the east as far as Nebraska City. A half-dozen big freighting concerns took up the task from there on.

"Call me Freeman," the man in buckskin stated. "Sam Freeman." He didn't say any more and Jay didn't ask.

"You took over some o' Lamonte's boys," a big man at Jay's left observed. "He won't be likin' it, mister." He walked along beside Jay.

Jay smiled. "Since when," he asked, "does a big man like Lamonte send three of his teamsters out to work on a small outfit like Excelsior?"

"There's a lot o' things Lamonte will do," he was told, "since old John Warburton grabbed that juicy government contract away from him."

Jay looked at Sam Freeman. He'd heard of the big firm of Lamonte, Darcy and Simmons, Freighters. It was a half-million-dollar concern, the largest in the Nebraska Territory. They were reputed to have over a thousand teamsters scattered over the network, twenty thousand oxen and mules, enormous wagonyards full of the best Murphys and the latest Studebaker wagons from the South Bend, Indiana, manufacturers.

"I just got in," Jay murmured. "You know anything about this, Freeman?"

The man in buckskin rubbed his aquiline nose. He spoke precisely as if giving a report.

"John Warburton, of the old Excelsior Freighting Company, got the United States Government contract to furnish supplies to the new Fort Taylor situated in the Sioux Reservation."

Jay nodded. He'd heard of the post recently set up along the Rosebud River.

"Lamonte wanted that contract," Freeman finished. "There's been a lot of rough play in town and half of the Excelsior teamsters have quit their jobs."

"Like today?" Jay asked grimly. "Three against one?"

"Sometimes," Freeman murmured, "it's worse. There's been a fire in the Excelsior yards. The last two bull outfits sent out by Warburton have failed to reach Fort Taylor."

The big rawboned man at Jay's left added, "There ain't a man in Nebraska City will handle one o' Warburton's trains. Lamonte sent the word out."

"Afraid?" Jay grinned coldly.

"Zeke McCord, Excelsior's last wagon master, had both arms broken," Freeman spoke up. "They found him in an alley the other end of town."

"Tom Malloy," the man at Jay's left chuckled, "was scalped by the Sioux three days before they reached Fort Taylor."

Jay Brandon finished his drink and set the glass down on the bar.

"Where is the Excelsior office, gentlemen?" he asked calmly. He felt Freeman's blue eyes on him.

"Head of Fremont Street," the big man told him. "Opposite Leroy's Saloon."

"I'll walk along," Freeman volunteered.

THE TWO turned down the street, crossed the road, skipping between two enormous Murphys rumbling toward the yards of Lamonte, Darcy and Simmons, and stopped outside the door of the Excelsior Freighting Company.

It was a long shed-like building of unpainted wood, one story high, and with a false front. A runway to the left led into the wagonyard. Jay saw the rows of enormous Murphy wagons, and a half dozen of the Espenshied models. There was little activity in the yards. A few men sauntered around or sat in the shade of the blacksmith shop. A fat rolypoly man in a tattered red flannel shirt pounded halfheartedly at a tire rim. He looked at them and grinned.

"You taking this job?" Freeman asked softly.

"If they need a wagon master," Jay said, "and I qualify, I'll take it."

Freeman shrugged. "I'll have a look around," he said. Jay watched him walk up the runway. He noticed for the first time the charred remains of one of the sheds in the yard. Freeman had spoken of a fire at the Excelsior yards.

Again Jay looked up at the sign. The window was open and he heard the woman's voice from inside. It was bitter, almost taunting.

"There's not a man in Nebraska City dares enter this door," she said tersely.

Jay Brandon blinked in surprise. He saw her face just above him, the small tight mouth, lips slightly curled in contempt; eyes dark and bitter.

"I reckon that doesn't apply to me," he grinned. "I'm from Denver."

"Oh, that explains it."

She studied him carefully as he came through the door. She was taller than he had thought—almost too tall for a woman. Her hair was as dark as her eyes. She sat behind a desk in the outer office.

"Mr. Warburton in?" Jay asked. "I hear he needs a wagon master."

She looked at his clothes a little contemptuously. "Who do you speak for?" she asked acidly.

Jay smiled. "Tell your boss Mr. Brandon is asking for the job," he said. He watched her walk into the other room. She nodded to him as she came out.

John Warburton stood in the doorway, a short white-haired man leaning on a cane for support. There was a half-smile on his smooth-shaven face and a twinkle in the blue eyes.

"Mr. Brandon?" he asked.

Jay nodded. "You need a wagon master," he said quietly. "I'd like the job." He noted the lines of worry in the short man's face.

The head of the Excelsior Freighting Company pursed his lips and looked at the girl.

"My daughter Priscilla," he introduced her.

Jay bowed from the waist.

"Come inside," John Warburton told him. "Had any experience?"

"I handled the wagons for the Colorado River Freighting Company," Jay explained. "Four years of it."

"What brings you to Nebraska City?" Warburton asked.

"Colorado folded up," Jay stated. "The mines petered out."

Warburton drummed on the desk with his fingers. "Undoubtedly," he smiled coldly, "you've heard of the trouble we are having getting the merchandise through?"

Jay nodded. "I've seen a little of it," he said grimly. "One of your teamsters was pulled from his wagon this afternoon."

Warburton's eyes turned a shade lighter. "I've lost half of my help," he admitted. "They've been threatened and abused. Many of have them have been bought out."

"Lamonte behind it?" Jay asked.

The old man shrugged. "Lamonte wanted that contract to begin with, and he's still aiming to get it." He paused. "We've lost the last two loads going through to Fort Taylor. If we lose the next one, the contract will be cancelled. I've already received word from Colonel Bradley, in command."

"When is the next outfit going through?" Jay wanted to know.

"We're loading at the piers now," Warburton explained. "It'll be ready to roll in three days. Thirty wagons, one hundred and fifty ton of foodstuffs."

"What happened to the last two trains?" Jay asked.

"One got as far as Elbow Creek," Warburton snapped bitterly. "The oxen stampeded. It took me a month to get the wagons back to Nebraska City. Half the teamsters deserted."

"The Sioux get the second?" Jay murmured.

John Warburton looked at him strangely. "So I've been told," he said. "Though the Sioux are supposed to be quiet right now."

Jay Brandon nodded. Time and again the old ruse had been worked—white men parading as Indians, and having the redmen blamed for the catastrophe. Warburton had not been fooled.

"You have a crew for this outfit?" he asked.

"There are about fifty of the older men left with me," John Warburton told him. "They'll stick till Excelsior goes under." He laughed a little grimly. "If we lose this Fort Taylor contract, I'm through. Lamonte already offered to buy me out—at about a third the value of the company."

He watched Jay's face thoughtfully. "You still willing to run the train?" he asked.

"I'd like to meet the men," Jay said. "We'll roll whenever you give the word."

John Warburton held out his hand. "Good luck," he said simply. "You know what to expect."

Out in the yard they saw a group of men squatting in a half circle over by the blacksmith shop.

"You can go back," Jay said softly. "We'll get acquainted."

John Warburton called out. "Boys—meet the new wagon master." Jay lit a cigar and then strolled forward. The teamsters remained seated on the ground. They were a mixed lot, mostly Missourians, with a sprinkling of Frenchmen, a few breeds, and a giant negro. Some of them held dirty playing cards in their hands, while the others watched the game.

Warburton stood by the door as Jay walked toward his men. None of them got up. He felt their eyes going over his clothing—the new beaver he'd purchased before leaving Denver, the trim black frock coat, and shining new boots.

"Well, boys," said Jay easily, "let's get down to work."

The mulatto grinned, revealing a row of pearly teeth. A French Canuck in a tattered white coat laughed in a high-pitched voice.

The fat man who had been laboring with the tire rim looked up. Rivulets of sweat dripped down his face to the ground.

"One of you boys help the gentleman with the wheel," Jay smiled. "The others can start greasing axles."

"We ain't usin' dem wagons, boss," the big darky grinned. "De wagons are all down at the pier."

Jay nodded. He was standing just above a big Missourian with tousled blond hair and hard sneering blue eyes.

"We'd like to keep the other wagons in condition," the new wagon master explained. "We may be using them shortly." He turned his head to look at John Warburton. The girl was leaning out the window, watching from the building.

"Everybody up," Jay said softly.

The Missourian looked him over from head to foot and then deliberately spat on the new boot. The mulatto went into hysterical guffaws.

JAY tightened his teeth on the cigar. Carefully, he placed the beaver on a peg in the nearby wall. Then, bending down suddenly, he grasped the Missourian by the lapels of his coat and yanked him to his feet. His right fist shot up, catching the man full on the jaw and knocking him against the wall.

He heard John Warburton yell and then he leaped through the circle of men, knocking cards and money aside. The Missourian was trying to straighten himself out when Jay knocked him back against the wall again, hitting straight out with his fists.

He struck a half-dozen times before the big teamster slumped to the ground, face cut and bleeding. It was all over in a matter of seconds, and the cigar was still set between the new wagon master's teeth.

The French Canuck was scrambling to his feet, his blacksnake whip in his hand when Jay let go with his right foot. He'd learned the French art of fighting from a Creole muleskinner in Denver.

His boot caught the Canuck in the stomach as he was lifting the stock of the whip. As he doubled up, Jay stepped in with a short punch to the jaw. There was no more fight in the Frenchman.

In fact, the fight was over.

The fat man let out a yell of surprise which turned to one of pain as he let the heavy tire fall down on his toes.

"Get the tar buckets," Jay said quietly. "Everybody move."

They got up this time, the mulatto scratching his head and staring at the inert form of the Missourian. The others gaped and then grinned.

"Get me a bucket of water," Jay told the fat man. He squatted down beside the Missourian a moment later and bathed his face with a wet handkerchief. John Warburton was still standing by the door watching him quietly.

The big blond-haired man opened his eyes. He sat up and shook his head.

"What happened?" he asked weakly.

"You fell," Jay said.

The Missourian rubbed his face gingerly. He saw the Canuck a few feet away on hands and knees, still panting for breath.

"Damn," he whispered. "Frenchy got it too!" He stared at Jay for a moment.

"What you got inside, mister," he mumbled, "a wildcat?"

"No hard feelings?" Jay said.

"Nary a one," the Missourian grinned. "I'm on your side, mister. Name's Malone."

Jay shook hands with him and stood up. He helped the Canuck to his feet and walked him to a nearby bench.

"By gar," the dark-skinned man gasped.

"When you feel better," Jay told him, "you help the other boys." He walked back to the office and John Warburton shook his head admiringly.

"I believe you've handled teamsters before, Mr. Brandon," he chuckled.

Jay nodded. It was necessary to meet a bullwhacker on his own ground, and he'd learned their way of fighting, adding a few of his own innovations.

"The wagons will be leaving in three days," Warburton went on. "Try to stay out of Lamonte's way while you're in Nebraska City, Mr. Brandon."

Jay smiled. He looked up at the girl in the window behind them. "Lamonte had better stop molesting my men," he said slowly, "or I'll be looking him up myself."

Warburton blinked. "I'd advise you to go armed," he said.

Jay swung open the frock coat, revealing the Colt .45 slung at his side.

"If you use it as well as your fists," the head of Excelsior smiled, "I'll have no worries."

Jay saw the trim figure of Sam Freeman standing at the front of the building.

"Need any night herders?" he asked Warburton suddenly.

"We're short all along the line," Warburton explained. "If you can persuade any men in Nebraska City to work for us, you're at liberty to hire them."

"I think I have one man," Jay murmured. He walked down the runway and stopped in front of the man in buckskin. Again he noticed Freeman's posture, comparing it with the lounging attitude of the real frontiersmen. Sam Freeman stood up straight, shoulders back, head erect. "Looking for work?" Jay asked.

Freeman shrugged. "With Excelsior?" he asked.

"I need a night herder," Jay told him. "We're rolling in three days to Fort Taylor. Want to come?"

"Why not?" Freeman said promptly.

"Lamonte won't like it," Jay grinned. The grin broadened when he saw the answering smile on Freeman's lean face. Freeman was like himself. Both men relished bucking a big man like Lamonte.

"I'll take my chances, mister," Freeman stated quietly.

II

THEY walked down to the wharf to watch the steamers unloading. Two dozen Excelsior wagons were lined up at one of the piers as husky roustabouts lifted boxes and heavy kegs into the Murphys.

Further along the water's edge they spotted a line of Lamonte's big Studebaker vehicles, husky Texas steers clanking the chains.

"He's a big man in this town," Freeman observed. "Started from scratch with two wagons and pulled himself up to the top."

"What about Darcy and Simmons?"

"They supply the cash for Lamonte," Freeman told him. "Black Jack is the kingpin. He makes the wheels go round."

"Black Jack Lamonte," Jay murmured.

"Let him alone," Freeman said, "and he'll buy out or force out every small operator like Warburton, and control the biggest freighting company in the States."

"He won't buy out Warburton," Jay said. He thought of the girl—the curl of her lips when he came in. She expected him to cringe when Jack Lamonte cracked the whip—crawl away as the others had.

"John Warburton was rolling freight wagons in this section when Lamonte was in short pants," Freeman pointed out. "He'll stick if he can."

"He'll be broke," Jay said, "if he loses this Fort Taylor contract. He can burn his wagons for firewood."

Back in town, they had to pass the Emperor Saloon to get to the hotel at which Jay was staying. There was a crowd in front of the saloon. Jay could see the red hair of the big bullwhacker he'd licked earlier in the afternoon.

A powerful dark-haired man in flat-crowned black sombrero stood in the center of the crowd. Jay saw only his shoulders and the back of his neck.

"Lamonte," Freeman said. "His boys probably have been complaining."

Jay unbuttoned his coat and walked forward slowly. "It might pay," he murmured, "to have a little chat with Mr. Lamonte."

He went on, Freeman following.

They gave him room when he was recognized. Lamonte turned around, revealing a bony, heavy-jawed face and piercing black eyes. His mouth was straight and large; the chin cloven down the middle.

The red-headed bullwhacker started to roar when he saw Jay. His nose was patched up and there were half a dozen small cuts on his face. Black Jack Lamonte stared at the man before him with interest.

"Mr. Lamonte?" Jay asked easily. He could read the ruthlessness in the big man's cold black eyes. Lamonte was the kind of man who had to have his own way or die.

"You the gentleman whipped Flannigan?" Lamonte asked. Jay caught the hint of humor in his tones. The crowd gathered around closer. Sam Freeman pushed up at Jay's side, his right hand on the butt of the Walker Colt.

"In the future," Jay told him, "I take it as a personal affront when a Lamonte teamster touches an Excelsior driver. Flannigan was working over one of Warburton's men."

Jack Lamonte shoved powerful hands inside his coat pockets. He rocked on the balls of his feet.

"You're taking quite a deep interest in Excelsior," the big man murmured. "A stranger in Nebraska City would play a much smarter game by keeping his nose out of affairs which do not concern him."

"I'm the new wagon master at Excelsior," Jay Brandon grinned. "Any man who touches an Excelsior driver will get a dose of the same thing Flannigan got." He smiled, but there was no humor in his eyes.

"No man in the world," Lamonte stated, "could do to me what you did to Flannigan."

"We'll let it go at that," Jay said. "This much I know. If any man interferes with Warburton's next bull outfit, I'm going after him with guns and not fists." He pushed past Black Jack Lamonte and walked toward the hotel.

Sam Freeman caught up with him half way down the block.

"Don't look behind," he whispered. "Grady's following you. I'll cut off and pick him up at the next corner."

Jay nodded grimly. It was problematical whether Lamonte had sent the bald-headed man, or whether Grady was acting on his own interests. Jay had knocked him down in the fight with the bullwhacker.

"He's armed," Freeman went on. "Keep your gun handy." The man in buckskin turned down the next alley.

Jay, watching him, saw the man sprint around the next corner. In a minute he'd be coming up on Grady from behind. Crossing the road, Jay glanced back out of the corner of his eye. He caught a glimpse of a man about thirty yards behind him. Another man in a blue-flannel shirt was just catching up with his pursuer.

The new Excelsior wagon master reached inside his coat, lifted the Colt halfway from the holster and spun the cylinder once. He had to face two guns now.

A half block from the hotel, Jay stopped suddenly and started to walk toward the two men. He read the surprise in their faces as they waited for him. The bald-headed Grady stepped out into the gutter and the man in the blue flannel shirt hugged the wall. At the same instant Jay saw Sam Freeman turn around the corner and come up behind the two Lamonte men.

"You boys looking for me?" Jay asked softly. His coat was swung open and the gun cleared.

Grady's small yellow eyes shifted to the other man on the walk. One of them was sure to get him if they both started firing at once. Jay waited for them to make the play. He saw Grady settling himself in the dust of the road.

Sam Freeman called out, "Grady."

The bald-headed man spun around. Freeman was not more than fifteen yards behind him, standing feet apart on the planked sidewalk, a small grin on his face.

Grady read the pattern and then dug for his gun. At the same time, the man in the blue shirt dropped his right hand. Jay Brandon leaped to the side. He heard Grady's gun and then Freeman's, but he kept his eyes on the man by the wall.

THE Lamonte teamster was lifting his weapon from the holster when Jay's gun barked. The bullet caromed off the brick wall behind the lank man. Jay

dropped to the street. He felt the return slug graze the top of the beaver, tipping it slightly to the side.

Freeman's big Dragoon gun boomed again. The man in the blue shirt threw another hasty shot which went wide of the mark. Jay levelled on him quietly and squeezed the trigger. The bullet knocked his man back against the wall. He tried to straighten up and shoot again.

Jay Brandon held his third shot as he watched the dying man trying to raise his gun for the last time. The effort was useless. With a heavy gasping sound, the man in the blue shirt slid down to the walk. His head hung on one side.

"That's all," Sam Freeman called from the corner.

Jay saw Grady lying on his face in the dirt. His six-shooter had fallen from his hand and was lying inches away from his outstretched fingers. There was a red streak across Freeman's cheek where the bald-headed man's bullet had touched him.

The crowd from up the street surged down toward them as the firing ceased. Jay Brandon watched Black Jack Lamonte striding along the walk, coat swinging open.

"I'll take anybody else who opens up," Freeman called to Jay. The wagon master nodded. This was the showdown and Lamonte was playing his hand.

A short stout man suddenly popped out of the Big Missouri Saloon and grasped Lamonte's arm. Jay saw him remonstrate with the head of the freighting outfit.

"That's Darcy," Freeman whispered. "He doesn't want Lamonte to risk a bullet in the head."

Jack Lamonte tried to break away and continue down the street, but Darcy clung to him. A man in calfskin vest rounded the corner and bore down at them. He wore a star on his left side.

"Sheriff Wade," Freeman said. "The fight's over."

They saw Lamonte and Darcy go back into the saloon. Wade looked at the two bodies and shook his head.

"Lamonte's boys," he murmured. "You hombres better clear out."

"They opened up on us," Jay told him quietly. "We're leaving when we're ready, Sheriff."

"Your funeral," Wade grunted.

Jay stopped in the next morning at the office of Excelsior. Priscilla greeted him with a nod.

"I heard about the fight," she said slowly. "Please be careful, Mr. Brandon."

"Because this load must go through?" Jay grinned. "Nothing else?"

"That's enough," the girl murmured, but he saw her face redden slightly. "Incidentally," she went on, "you're taking a passenger through to Fort Taylor."

"Who?" Jay asked.

"Me," she told him.

Jay laughed. "Not this load," he stated flatly. "It'll be no place for a woman."

"I've gone with bull outfits before," Priscilla Warburton said stiffly.

"Not when I was wagon master," Jay grinned. "Forget about it." He went into the office and John Warburton shook hands with him. "Your daughter wants to ride along with the train," Jay said. He heard her come in behind him and stand by the door.

The head of the Excelsior Freighting Company nodded gloomily. "I don't like to do it," he muttered.

Jay stared. "You mean she's to go?" he asked. "It's eight hundred miles to Fort Taylor—two months on the road!"

"I can't go myself," Mr. Warburton told him, "and somebody has to sign papers, renewing the contracts. Priscilla is an official of the company."

"It'll be dangerous," Jay said, "if Lamonte tries to stop us."

"I hope I can depend upon you to bring her safely through," Warburton replied. "A cavalry escort will return to Nebraska City with you so it'll be safe on the way back."

"There's no other way?" Jay asked. "Couldn't I sign for the company?"

"They wouldn't accept your signature, Mr. Brandon," Warburton explained. "Priscilla has handled transactions before. I can depend upon her to see to the company's best interests." He smiled at his daughter as he spoke.

"I promise to stay out of your way, Mr. Brandon," Priscilla said acidly.

"As you will," Jay told her. He went out. Sam Freeman listened to the story with interest.

"If I know anything about army procedure," the man said, "Colonel Bradley wouldn't be able to deal with anyone but

an actual agent or part owner of the company. If Mr. Warburton can't go, I imagine his daughter is the only one who can negotiate with the Colonel."

Jay Brandon laughed grimly. "If we don't get this load through," he said, "there'll be no contract to renew."

THEY rolled out of Nebraska City the next morning at ten o'clock. The thirty big Murphy wagons rumbled through the dust, wheels sinking deep into the road, eight yoke of oxen to each wagon.

Jay Brandon, riding a taffy-maned gelding, trotted up along the line of wagons. He'd exchanged the black frock coat for one of buckskin. A flat-crowned sombrero took the place of the beaver.

The thirty Excelsior bullwhackers strode along beside their wagons cracking the long blacksnake whips. Sam Freeman had gone ahead with six other night herders, driving with them extra stock.

The cavalcade rolled past the Emperor Saloon and a crowd came out to watch. Jay saw Jack Lamonte smoking a long, black cigar, hands thrust into his vest pockets. The big freighting man stared at him as he trotted past on the gelding. His black eyes flickered slightly as the lead wagon, with Priscilla Warburton on the seat, lumbered past.

The big red-headed bullwhacker stood with him, his nose encased in bandages. Another shorter man with a thin face and long bony nose stood at Lamonte's left. He watched Jay steadily as if measuring him.

As the wagon master moved his horse past, Malone, the Excelsior bullwhacker, motioned to him to come closer.

"The little man," Malone grunted, "is Cole Hartman. We run across him out on the trail two days afore Tom Malloy got it."

"I thought Malloy was scalped," Jay said steadily.

Malone laughed bitterly. "They wasn't Indians," he snapped. "One of 'em had a mustache. They run off our stock an' when Tom went after 'em, he got into a ambush. He had ten bullets in him an' his top was gone."

"They get the wagons, too?" Jay asked.

Malone nodded. "When we was chasin' the stock, another party of 'em came in behind and burned up all the wagons."

Jay glanced back at Cole Hartman. Undoubtedly, Lamonte had used Hartman the last time to break up the outfit. Hartman said something to Lamonte and then the big man threw away his cigar.

"He's quick with a gun, too," Malone muttered. "If we meet him on the trail, Brandon, you better shoot first."

"I intend to," Jay said briefly.

The bullwhackers broke into the old "Root Hog or Die" song as they rolled out of town. Jay listened thoughtfully. He watched the line of plodding men and oxen. Frenchy Ledeaux, the mulatto Sam Carson, the fat man, Tibbs Bragan. Malone led the singing.

"I'll tell you how it is when
You first get on the road.
You have an awkward team and
A very heavy load.

You have to whip and holler, but
Swear upon the sly.
You're in for it then, boys,
Root hog or die!"

The last came with a terrific roar, big Carson's deep bass sounding above the others. Jay Brandon rode on ahead to catch up with Freeman and the stock. He passed Priscilla's wagon and tipped his hat politely. The girl nodded. She had her own horse tied behind the wagon, a small white-stockinged black animal.

Amos Gaunt, company scout and hunter, rode at the head of the train. Jay moved up beside him. Gaunt was a small figure in a bulky buffalo coat. He had drooping yellow mustaches and keen gray eyes.

"How far do we get tonight?" Jay asked. "I've never been in this country."

Gaunt shrugged. "We kin make fifteen mile," he figured, "or maybe twenty, dependin' upon the mood o' these damned animals." He paused and spat into the dust of the road. "That'll take us up to Arrowhead Creek."

"Think we'll hit any trouble with the Sioux?" Jay went on.

"Ain't no Sioux this side o' the Rosebud," Gaunt told him. "They're mostly over near the mountains this time o' year cuttin' lodge poles." He looked at Jay steadily. "It ain't the red devils I'm

worryin' about," he observed, "it's the white ones."

"We'll handle them," Jay said grimly.

Gaunt stared straight ahead. "Three days along Arrowhead Creek an' Big Paint River, we hit long grass."

"Long grass?" Jay murmured.

"It burns," Gaunt said flatly. "Burns like hell."

Jay Brandon looked at his horse's ears. "Thanks, Amos," he said quietly. "I'll bear it in mind."

"I ain't aimin' to fry myself," Gaunt told him.

III

THEY camped that night on the other side of Arrowhead Creek, a shallow, weedy stretch of water about thirty yards across. Sam Freeman stood at the big fire before going out with the other night herders.

Jay walked over to him. Amos Gaunt was drinking coffee from a big tin cup a few feet away. The company cook was making enormous quantities of beans and bacon.

Looking from Gaunt to Freeman, Jay couldn't help but notice the difference. Gaunt was the typical frontiersman, slouching, slow of speech, slurring his words. Freeman, even as he ate, stood erect. He didn't gulp his food like the others.

"I'm putting you in charge of the night herders," Jay said. "We'll be keeping most of the stock inside the enclosure at night, but we won't be able to accommodate the extra animals."

Instinctively, Freeman stiffened as Jay gave him the orders. The wagon master paused beside Gaunt as Freeman went away into the night.

"Ever run across Freeman before?" he asked.

"Never seen him," Gaunt said indifferently. He wiped his hands on the blackened buckskin leggins.

Jay made his round of the corral. The wagons were drawn up in the shape of a huge horseshoe, the front wheels of each vehicle chained to the rear wheels of the Murphy in front of it, tongues turned inward. The most ferocious Texas steer on the trail would have a difficult time breaking out of the enclosure.

Moving through the darkness, he heard Priscilla Warburton's voice calling him from the wagon. He went over.

"Keeping the oxen inside tonight?" she asked.

"Tonight," Jay said, "and every night." It was the custom to let them out to graze at the end of the day's haul and drive them into the enclosure early the next morning for yoking.

"When do they graze?" Priscilla asked curiously.

"We start an hour later each morning," the wagon master explained. "We can run them outside the corral and keep a close watch on them in the daylight." He realized that if Lamonte struck at them, it would be through the animals first. With the oxen stampeded, the wagons would be stalled on the trail.

"You seem to know your business," Miss Warburton said grudgingly. "I give you credit for it."

"Thank you, ma'am," Jay grinned. "I've had lots of experience." He touched his hat and went on. He'd met women in the silver towns in Colorado and further west on the coast, but none like Priscilla Warburton. She was efficient and she stood up to him.

Arrowhead Creek emptied into the Big Paint River. There was a fording place which all the bull outfits took when heading into the Sioux country. It was at the first bend of the Big Paint where the river was only about two hundred feet across and the bottom sandy and firm.

Jay saw the tall grass waving on the other side of the river. He looked at Amos Gaunt and the scout rubbed his jaw with a grimy hand. That night Jay rode back along the river's edge for several miles with Sam Freeman.

"I don't think they'll strike this early," Freeman stated. "We're still too close to Nebraska City."

"I'm curious," Jay muttered. "If someone's on my tail I like to know who it is."

It was a clear moonlit night and they saw nothing. Amos Gaunt met them as they were coming back.

"We're only about fifty miles from Nebraska City," the scout said. "That ain't a far ride for men who want to come badly enough. They kin set home and light out whenever they're ready."

Jay Brandon nodded. It was logical enough. If Lamonte wanted to come after them, he could start out in the morning and pick them up whenever he wished.

Starting at four o'clock the next morning, they pushed on for eight miles through the tall grass coming up to the tops of the wagon wheels. Jay stared at the dry, brown fields stretching along the river. He chose his campsite carefully that night, selecting a gradual slope thirty yards up from the river.

When the wagons were rolled into the corral and the oxen unyoked, big Malone slipped his chains from the wagon and prepared to fasten his wheels.

Jay called to him sharply. "No chains tonight, Malone."

The bullwhacker blinked. "No chains?" he asked.

"Pass the word down the line," Jay told him. "None of the wagons are to be chained."

Priscilla Warburton heard the command and she climbed down from Tibbs Bragan's wagon.

"Aren't you getting a bit careless, Mr. Brandon?" she asked quietly. "I realize we are not in danger so close to Nebraska City, but—"

"Your father hired me as wagon master," Jay told her flatly. "I'm giving the orders." He saw her lips tighten and he grinned as she strode down toward the river.

Sam Freeman, sitting astride his blue roan, watched complacently as the enclosure was made. All the wagons were rolled into the usual horseshoe, but the wheels were not chained.

"Take your stock along the river's edge," Jay called to the night herder. "Keep them close to the water. You'll know what to do if anything happens."

Freeman smiled. "You afraid of this grass, Brandon?" he asked.

"Yes," Jay told him. "I don't like it." He set a double guard that night before turning in. Priscilla Warburton came up as he was eating at the big fire.

"I still think it's foolish," she snapped. "The men will be acquiring lax habits."

Jay drank his coffee with relish. "Let me worry about their habits," he chuckled.

Two hours before dawn, one of the guards shot off his gun.

JAY leaped from under the wagon. In the darkness he bumped into Amos Gaunt.

"It'll be gettin' hot," the scout muttered, "like I thought."

"The wind blowing toward us?" Jay asked grimly. Out beyond the enclosure, about a hundred yards distant, he saw bright spots of moving light. Here and there new lights were springing up as if by magic, forming a giant half-circle around the wagon enclosure.

Gaunt sniffed loudly and then swore under his breath. "They were waitin' all night till the breeze shifted this way," he said. "That grass will go up like tinder. Git yore wagons rollin', mister."

Jay raced to the two smoldering fires in the center of the corral. Picking up huge armfuls of dried grass he'd stored there the previous night, he threw them on the fire. Immediately, the enclosure was lit up. Stumbling men rolling out from beneath the wagons, blinked at the ring of fire sweeping toward them from the prairie.

"Drive the stock into the river!" Jay shouted. A dozen men complied with his order. From up the river they heard a few shots and faint yells. Jay Brandon smiled. Sam Freeman was undoubtedly doing the same thing with his animals.

"You'll have to git them wagons out o' here," Gaunt called.

Jay nodded. He saw Priscilla Warburton running toward him in the firelight. The remaining bullwhackers waited for the next order.

"Turn your wagons around!" Jay yelled. "Head them toward the river." The roaring ring of fire was now only seventy-five yards away. They could feel the heat. Burning embers dropped around them as they worked.

A half-dozen men grasped the wheels of a wagon and turned it about so the Murphy faced the river.

"Get a man on the seat," Jay shouted. "Brake it as it rolls."

The bullwhackers got the implication. All the Murphys were standing on a slight incline and it required but a little push to start them rolling toward the river of their own volition.

Another wagon and then another was whirled around and sent rumbling down

the grade. Jay Brandon watched the fire sweeping toward them. He caught a glimpse of riders behind the flames, but was unable to discern whether they were white men or Indians.

"We better be ready fer 'em," Gaunt called, "when this fire gits down to the water. They'll try to rush us."

More than half the wagons were already rolling into the water. The others got clear when the fire was still thirty yards away. Jay raced after the last one. He saw the girl just ahead of him. She stumbled as she ran.

THE riders behind the fire were now shooting through the flames and Jay heard the bullets whistle past him. Amos Gaunt stopped to return the fire while Jay ran ahead to pick up the girl.

She was gasping for breath as he lifted her from the ground and ran toward the water. All the wagons were safely in the river with the bawling oxen scrambling around between them.

Jay plunged knee-deep into the river and waded out to the nearest wagon. He set the girl down on the seat and then called to the bullwhackers.

Malone was the first one to reach him.

"Line the men up along the river," Jay ordered. "If they try to break through, we'll give them all they asked for."

"Ledeaux's wagon went over," Malone informed him. "I reckon all the others got down in good shape."

Jay nodded. He saw the Frenchman's wagon lying at the edge of the river, Ledeaux having jumped clear when it tilted. They had saved twenty-nine out of the thirty wagons, and it was possible the flames never would reach Ledeaux's Murphy as the grass was short and the earth marshy at the river's edge.

"Here they come!" Amos Gaunt yelled. "Give it to 'em, boys!"

The bullwhackers were stretched out along the bank, rifles ready. There were about forty or fifty men behind the flames. Jay could see them more clearly now. They were white men. He thought he caught a glimpse of the small wiry Cole Hartman, Lamonte's right-hand man, but he wasn't sure.

The teamsters opened fire as the attackers came up behind the flames. Jay saw a half dozen saddles emptied. Men screamed in the smoke and flames.

The fire rolled up through the shorter grass near the water and the smoke choked and blinded them.

Coughing and gasping for breath, Jay turned his face away for a moment. Two riders were driving through the fire when he faced around again. He shot twice at the nearer man and saw him slip from the saddle and drop, screaming, into the burned embers.

The second rider spurred directly at him, gun cracking. Jay felt one slug go through his shirt. He shot quickly and the horse stumbled to its knees, shooting the rider over its head.

Big Denny Malone grabbed the man as he hit the grass. Jay saw him pick up the rider and rush him into the water. He heard the man's gurgling gasp. When Malone came back, he was alone.

"I reckon they're runnin'," Amos Gaunt called.

Flames were beginning to lick at Ledeaux's wagon when Jay gave the order to save it. Three bullwhackers tore the burning canvas from the load and beat out the flames with wet blankets.

A rider hammered down along the river and came toward them.

"Don't fire!" he yelled. It was Sam Freeman. He grinned when he saw the wagons and the oxen out in the water.

"Where are your animals?" Jay asked.

"All safe," Freeman chuckled, "but a little wet."

Jay waded out to the wagon in which Priscilla Warburton was crouching. The prairie fire was sputtering out as it reached the stretch of marsh along the river, but the acrid smoke still hung over them. The girl coughed several times before speaking.

"It was very clever," she said quietly. "I want to apologize, Mr. Brandon."

"No need," Jay told her. "This is my business. I'm taking these wagons through to Fort Taylor if I have to go by way of Hell itself."

"You think Lamonte was behind the raid?" Priscilla asked.

"We won't know till morning," Jay explained. "A number of the men were hit and we might be able to identify some of Lamonte's teamsters."

"Did we lose anything?" Priscilla asked.

"One wagon slightly scorched," Jay grinned, "and a few bullet wounds—nothing serious."

"They won't stop at this," Miss Warburton murmured. "Lamonte will strike again."

"We'll be ready for him," Jay said quietly. "I'm hoping the next time he comes in person."

They found eight bodies in the morning, lying in the charred remains of the fire. Malone immediately identified two of them as Lamonte's bullwhackers. The others were strangers.

Double yokes of oxen were hitched to the wagons and they were drawn out on the bank of the Big Paint river. An hour after dawn the cavalcade was rolling again.

IV

THREE days later they turned north from the Big Paint and struck out over the trackless plain. Amos Gaunt shot buffalo and kept the crew well supplied with fresh meat. Each night Jay Brandon rode back along the trail watching for signs of Lamonte's men, but they seemed to have disappeared.

"They'll be back," Gaunt muttered. "I used to work with Lamonte's outfit. He don't give up till he's dead."

Jay Brandon stared toward the north and the west. They still had hundreds of miles of trail ahead of them, and Lamonte would have plenty of opportunities to strike again.

Week after week they moved up the trail, fording the Elk, the Smoky and then the Sand, pushing toward the Rosebud. Time and again the Excelsior wagons threatened to give way. Axles and wheels snapped as they cut across dry plain. They had to stop for two days in a hickory grove to replenish the spare axles which had all been used up.

Tire irons loosened as the wheels shrunk, and they had to be burned on again, consuming valuable time while the train stopped. Three hundred miles from Fort Taylor they ran across a war party of Arapahoes in from the mountain country.

Amos Gaunt spotted the wide trail and pulled up suddenly. Jay Brandon rode up beside him. The trail was very fresh —not more than a few hours' old.

The scout dismounted and picked up a tuft of feather. He grimaced. "Reckon there must be two hundred of 'em," he mumbled. "Arapahoes."

"They're not fighting the whites," Jay said.

Gaunt laughed softly. "Nobody kin ever tell when an Indian is fightin' or not fightin'. This party probably came after Cheyenne horses, but I'm hopin' we don't strike 'em ourselves."

"You think they'll attack us?" Jay wanted to know.

Gaunt shrugged. "There's a lot o' stuff in these wagons they'd like to have," he said, "and there's allus a lot o' young bucks on these war parties who don't give a hoot who they fight as long as they fight."

"They're heading south," Jay murmured. "We might never see them."

"But they'll see us," Gaunt grinned. "Never fear. One o' their hunters will strike our trail and they'll foller to see who we are."

The Arapahoes discovered them late the next afternoon. Jay spotted them at a distance of a half mile—a long column of riders moving along the rim of a hill.

"Git 'em circlin," Gaunt growled. "Don't take any chances, Brandon."

Jay was already giving the orders, and the train wheeled into a compact circle, wagon tongues inside. The bullwhackers were chaining the wheels when the Arapahoes tore down at them.

"Don't anybody fire," Jay shouted, "till I give the word."

"They ain't attackin'," Gaunt muttered. "when they do, you won't see 'em comin'." He paused. "It'll do good, though, to show 'em we're ready to fight. It teaches 'em a little respect."

There were about two hundred in the party which raced down the hill, shouting shrilly, and firing guns into the air. Jay saw that Priscilla Warburton was safe out of sight inside the wagon. He waited with Gaunt and Freeman as the war party came to a halt a hundred yards away.

"Reckon they want to talk," Gaunt said. "Better give 'em a few bags o' flour, Brandon."

Jay watched with interest the sinewy hawk-eyed men from the mountain country. He'd had experiences with the shorter, ferocious Apaches to the south. The

Arapahoes were different—a tall, handsome, sharp-nosed people, resplendent in gaudy war clothes, brightly painted shields and lances: spotted Indian ponies painted with the same material the men daubed on their faces.

A half dozen of them rode forward slowly, hands upraised. Jay heard Amos Gaunt swear behind him.

"Too many young bucks," the scout stated flatly. "I don't like it, Brandon." He walked out with the wagon master as Jay climbed between two of the wagons and waited for the chiefs.

Gaunt spoke to them in the sign language.

"Red men want to greet white brothers," Gaunt grinned. "Think o' that!"

"Ask them what they want," Jay said tersely.

"Presents," Gaunt growled. "What else?"

Jay saw the Arapahoe leaders staring at the wagons. He called back to Malone inside the enclosure. "Bring out three bags of flour, a sack of sugar and a drum of molasses."

Two of the teamsters helped carry the goods out and place it on the ground.

"More," Gaunt growled. "They say it ain't enough."

"Tell them the wagons are going to the white soldiers on the Rosebud," Jay snapped. "We can't give them any more."

The Arapahoe chieftains listened to Gaunt gravely. Three of them were older men and they spoke rapidly to the younger element. Jay Brandon waited till they were finished.

"Tell them to take what they got," he said to Gaunt, "or we'll have the soldiers chase them back to the mountains."

The scout chuckled. "That's the language they understand, mister," he said softly.

The Arapahoes finally picked up the merchandise and rode back with it. Jay watched the entire group whirl away toward the south. He breathed more freely.

"It was close enough," Gaunt said. "Them young bucks ain't satisfied, but the big chiefs told 'em to take what was given 'em."

"You think they'll come back?" Jay asked.

"Not unless someone brings 'em," Gaunt said sagely.

Jay nodded in understanding.

THEY camped that night on the spot and got away to an early start in the morning. At noon they crossed the Buffalo Creek and made eight miles before stopping at Painted Rock.

Constantly, Jay Brandon rode back during the day to watch for white or red riders. Lamonte should have struck a long way back, but he didn't. Day after day they waited for the attack which never came.

"Maybe," Sam Freeman advised, "he's given it up. They know we can fight off a good-sized body of men."

"He's waiting," Priscilla murmured. "When he comes it'll be with a good chance of success."

Jay Brandon looked at the girl closely. She had held her own with the men from the start and had never complained. Her face was tanned from the sun and her eyes were bright. Often now, she rode with him as he trotted his horse ahead of the train.

"It means a lot to you," Jay told her, "to get this outfit through."

Priscilla Warburton laughed. "As a child," she said quietly, "I remember my father driving a single broken-down wagon. He's built up Excelsior and I'd hate to see it go down."

Jay called a halt at three o'clock that afternoon to give the oxen a little extra rest. The animals were losing weight and they were still several days out of Fort Taylor.

As the thirty Murphys started to circle, Amos Gaunt rode up to the wagon master and tapped him on the shoulder.

"I reckon we ought to take a little ride, Brandon," the scout said softly.

Jay looked at him quickly. Gaunt's face was grim and sober.

"I seen smoke," Gaunt grunted. "It's gone now, but I figger we ought to have a look."

Jay looked around for Sam Freeman to give him his orders with the herd, but the night rider wasn't in sight. He'd probably gone on ahead with his stock to look for better grazing land.

"Let's go," Jay said. He saw Priscilla

watching him from the wagon as he rode off. She waved a hand.

"How far off!" Jay asked.

"Maybe five miles," Gaunt replied. "It could be a hunting party of Arapahoes, or it could be somebody else."

They were riding toward the south and the west—the direction the Arapahoes had taken when they left. Gaunt had little to say on the way. He pointed again after they'd ridden about three miles.

"Reckon you'll have to look close to see it," the scout muttered. "They're burnin' dry wood an' it don't smoke."

Jay Brandon saw the thin trailer of white smoke scarcely discernible against the late afternoon sky.

"We'll ride careful," Gaunt told him.

They had to recross Buffalo Creek and follow the stream a half mile before Gaunt called a halt. He dismounted and tied his mount to a willow growing along the bank.

"I figger we'll find 'em on the other side o' this grove," the scout muttered. "We'll crawl up on 'em, Brandon."

They pushed their way through the thicket for nearly a quarter of a mile. Through the trees, Jay could see other trailers of smoke, indicating a rather large encampment.

Gaunt stopped as the grove thinned out. They could see moving figures ahead of them.

"Indians!" Jay murmured.

"Not all of 'em," Gaunt scowled. They lay on their faces in the grass and peered between the branches. "Looks like a meetin' goin' on," the scout said. "There's Lamonte."

"Lamonte?" Jay Brandon tightened. He saw the big man talking with the Arapahoe chiefs through an interpreter. The red-headed Flannigan was with him on one side, and the small Cole Hartman on the other. There were about fifty white men in a group, watching furtively.

"It's the same war party we run across," Gaunt whispered.

"What's Lamonte saying?" Jay asked tightly. They were using the sign language and even at the distance Gaunt could make out most of the talk.

"He's askin' the Arapahoes to join him in an attack on the train," Gaunt mumbled. "When a man goes that far—"

Jay Brandon laughed coldly. "Lamonte won't stop at anything," he said. "He's probably been following us all along, waiting for a break like this. He was afraid to attack with only fifty men. If he gets the Arapahoes to work with him, they'll outnumber us four or five to one."

Gaunt laughed suddenly. "Some o' them chiefs ain't fallin' for his stuff," he said. "They don't want the white soldiers after 'em."

Another man who had been standing on the side suddenly joined in the conversation. He was holding a horse by the bridle—a blue roan, Jay Brandon stiffened.

"Damn!" Amos Gaunt whispered. The scout's mouth opened in surprise. He half lifted himself from the ground and Jay had to pull him down.

A party of young bucks pushed a group of ponies down toward the water. They were coming perilously close.

"We'd better git," Gaunt muttered.

Jay Brandon took another close look at the man with the blue roan horse. He was wearing buckskins. Then they crawled back through the grove. Neither man spoke till they were up on their feet and trotting toward the place where they'd left the horses.

"You recognize him, too?" Jay asked quietly. "I wasn't seeing things?"

"It was Freeman," the scout snarled. "I'd know him. He was no more a scout than I'm a senator."

JAY climbed on his horse slowly. "I don't understand it," he said. "Freeman saved my life in Nebraska City. He was working with me against Lamonte. Now he's on Lamonte's side."

"He's a queer one," Gaunt told him. "He never had much to say. Maybe Lamonte had him on the payroll all along an' he was spyin' on us." The scout paused. "He might have got Lamonte an' the Arapahoes together."

"If they come," Jay said flatly, "they'll be coming tonight or in the morning."

"We'll have to give 'em a nice welcome," Amos Gaunt grinned.

Jay rode along in silence. It was a little difficult trying to reconcile Sam Freeman's conduct. He'd looked upon Freeman as his friend—a man who had stood with him in a gun fight in the streets of

Nebraska City. The Freeman who was leading a band of Indians against white men was a different character.

"If he comes in tonight," Gaunt said, "you'd better put him in irons, Brandon."

"I don't think he'll be in," Jay told him.

Back at the corral, he summoned Malone and the other teamsters and told them the news.

"We can expect an Indian attack any time," Jay finished, "from now till morning." He paused. "Black Jack Lamonte will probably be leading it."

Priscilla Warburton heard the last part of it and Jay saw her mouth tighten.

"So he's using Indians?" she asked when the bullwhackers had dispersed.

"The Arapahoes," Jay said. "Gaunt thinks he'll be able to swing over a lot of the young bucks from the war party. They want to fight."

"Can we get a man through to the fort for aid?" the girl asked.

Jay nodded. "I'm sending Gaunt out tonight. He's picking out a fast animal now."

An hour later he shook hands with the scout and watched him ride out into the twilight. He called Malone and Frenchy Ledeaux.

"How many barrels of oil have we in the cargo?" he asked.

Malone scratched his mop of hair. "Maybe five," he said.

"Unload it," Jay told him. "Quick."

"Oil?" Ledeaux muttered. "Why, *monsieur?*"

"Get it out," Jay snapped. No man slept that night when the fires went out. Even Priscilla Warburton sat on the wagon seat with Jay Brandon listening for the slightest sound.

"I thought Indians didn't attack at night," she said once.

"Lamonte is leading this attack," Jay said. "He's no respecter of time."

It was after midnight that one of the guards came in with the news that a party on horseback was approaching.

"Everything set?" Jay asked.

"We're ready," the bullwhacker whispered.

"Get inside the wagon," Jay told the girl. "Shoot at the first face you see coming in."

Priscilla Warburton smiled in the darkness. "I've used a gun before," she said quietly.

Jay climbed down and made a quick round of the corral. Every man was in his place, a number of them lying on top of the wagon loads ready to fire at the first charge.

Malone popped out of the darkness. "They're comin'," he said hoarsely. "I saw 'em dismount in the valley on the other side o' the ridge. They're comin' on foot."

"Tell the men to start the fires when I shoot," Jay ordered. Malone raced away again.

THE wagon master waited a few minutes and then lifted his gun and squeezed the trigger. The report echoed through the night. Immediately a half dozen small fires sprang up about thirty yards distant from the wagon corral.

With incredible speed, the fires leaped along the ground like great snakes. In a moment the different fires had joined, forming a giant ring around the enclosure.

Jay Brandon smiled coldly. Just behind the fire he could see the figures of advancing men.

"Start firing," he called sharply. Rifles opened up on either side of him. He heard the screams and the high-pitched Arapahoe yell. Malone trotted up breathlessly.

"That oil did it, Brandon!" he called gleefully. "There ain't nobody comin' through there."

Jay crouched down behind the barricade of boxes they'd erected underneath each wagon. He fired at the flitting figures beyond the wall of flame. Fortunately, they had corraled the wagons on an open plain with patches of short buffalo grass here and there. He'd had the men pour the oil on the bare ground so the fire wouldn't spread back to the wagons. It was working out to perfection.

"If we can hold them off till morning," the wagon master said grimly, "we'll be all right. Gaunt will be on his way back with a troop from the fort."

Lamonte's crew and the Arapahoes were creeping up close behind the flames and firing through into the enclosure. Two of the Excelsior teamsters were hit, but not badly. Jay had them carried into one of the wagons.

Through a section where the fire was low, a half dozen white men suddenly appeared, driving toward the wagons. Malone, and the fat man, Bragan, crouched on the ground and opened fire on them. Three went down. Another stumbled forward on hands and knees, while the remaining two broke and fled back through the fire.

"That'll hold 'em," Malone roared. "Come again, you damned renegades."

Another man suddenly leaped through the flames. He was dressed in buckskin. Holding up his hands, he raced forward yelling at the top of his voice.

Jay Brandon stared at him. "Don't fire!" he cried.

A half-dozen shots from the other side of the fire followed the running man. He dove over the barricade and sprawled on the ground inside the corral. It was Amos Gaunt.

Jay Brandon helped the man to his feet. Gaunt had a bullet wound in the right arm and the blood was dripping from his fingers. He stared at the wagon master ruefully and then shook his head.

"What happened?" Jay asked.

"Party o' Arapahoes chased me," Gaunt explained. "My horse stepped in a gopher hole and went down with a broken leg. I crawled through the grass and got away." He stared at the ground. "Was no use tryin' to git to Fort Taylor on foot," he finished. "I thought I'd come back an' try it ag'in."

Jay shook his head. "You couldn't get through now," he said quietly. "They're all around us."

"I kin make a try," the scout told him stubbornly. "Damn those gophers!"

"We'll need every man who can shoot a gun," Jay Brandon said. "You'd better stay, Gaunt." He paused. "See anything of Freeman out there?" he asked suddenly.

Gaunt laughed coldly. "I reckon he'll keep himself well hidden," the scout snapped. "But he might try to sneak in here an' try some more o' his tricks."

Jay saw to Gaunt's wound.

There was a lull in the firing and Jay crawled behind the barricade toward Malone. He heard Priscilla Warburton's voice at his elbow.

"You should stay in the wagon," he told her sternly.

"I thought I might like to get a few shots at them," she murmured. "Do you mind?"

"No," Jay grinned. "Good hunting." He was about to pass on when she said:

"Was it Gaunt who came back?"

Jay blinked. "His horse fell," he said slowly. "He came back for another."

"But he won't get through, will he, Brandon?" she asked quietly.

There was a moment of silence. "No," Jay said truthfully. "I'm not going to risk him again."

"How many men has Lamonte with him?" Priscilla asked calmly.

Jay shrugged. "Possibly a hundred and fifty or two hundred," he said. "We'll hold them off." Already, he noted the flames were dying down as the oil in the ground was consumed. It would probably last till morning, but after that they would have to think of something else.

"Four to one," Miss Warburton said. "I wish you luck, Mr. Brandon."

Jay looked at her steadily. "You have a pistol?" he asked. She was carrying a Springfield rifle in her hand.

She took from her dress a small black derringer.

"Keep one bullet in it all the time," Jay said.

"Lamonte's a white man," Priscilla Warburton murmured.

"Not out here," Jay told her. "He's redder than those Arapahoes." He'd seen Lamonte's face once as the big man led a party of his teamsters around the far side of the corral. Black Jack Lamonte was in his element fighting with the red men. "If we're wiped out," Jay concluded, "it'll be blamed on the Arapahoes. Lamonte won't want any survivors."

THE false dawn came up as the fire flickered out on the prairie. The forty-five Excelsior teamsters crouched behind the barricade and peered into the semi-darkness.

Jay heard Lamonte calling to some of his men. "Get ready for a charge!" Jay yelled.

Gaunt shook his head. "He'd be a fool to try it on foot now," the scout explained. "They'll go back for their horses."

Jay Brandon watched the red come into

the sky. He could make out the dark figures out on the prairie.

"I'm ready to go ag'in," Gaunt said softly.

Jay hesitated. "I don't like to send a man out to die," he objected.

"We'll be dyin' either way," Gaunt chuckled, "an' if I git through, there's a chance fer all of us."

Jay stared at Priscilla Warburton crouching behind a wall of boxes several yards away.

"All right, Gaunt," he said softly. "Pick out your horse."

The scout slipped away. He came back a few minutes later and pressed Jay's hand.

"Good luck," the wagon master murmured.

"I figger to git through this time," Gaunt said grimly. "With any luck, I'll get back afore nightfall. Hold 'em off, Brandon."

Jay nodded. It was a long time till nightfall. He watched Gaunt slip into the saddle and then he knocked a few of the boxes down. The scout leaped his mount through the gap and shot out of the corral.

Jay listened to the drive of hoofbeats. He watched Gaunt as he rode through a gap between the dark figures on the prairie. There were a half dozen shots and then Amos Gaunt's high-pitched yell. Jay wasn't sure whether it was caused by pain or elation at getting through. After that, the silence.

Lamonte came back with the first rays of the sun. Jay watched the line of riders trotting down from the nearby slope. With two hundred men at his command, Lamonte intended to ride right over the fortifications. Once inside, the rest would be easy.

"Get ready," Jay called. He heard Priscilla Warburton's gun hammer click. She smiled at him and he saw the black derringer within reach of her hand.

The first wave of riders hit them with terrific impact. Wisely, Lamonte had permitted the Arapahoes to ride in the fore, and the anxious young bucks rode to within twenty-five yards of the enclosure before the deadly fire of the teamsters halted them. Dozens were strewn on the ground, screaming amongst the kicking animals.

Behind the Arapahoes came Lamonte and Cole Hartman, riding together, with the fifty bullwhackers behind them. Some of them came through the corral, driving over the opening of the horseshoe which had been barricaded with cases of foodstuffs.

Jay Brandon raced toward the spot. He was almost knocked down by Hartman's horse—a big black gelding. Hartman's gun flamed in his hand and Jay felt the impact of the bullet in his left shoulder. He shot twice with his six-shooter and the gelding galloped in among the bawling cattle, riderless.

Malone, Ledeaux and Bragan were at the gap, swinging the stocks of their rifles as a dozen Lamonte teamsters tried to come through. Jay saw Malone pick up one man bodily and hurl him through the air. Lamonte himself was only a dozen yards away, calling for the Arapahoes to come on again.

Jay flashed a shot at him but missed. A score of Excelsior men raced down from the other end of the corral, firing as they came. The battle at the breached section ended suddenly.

Frenchy Ledeaux leaped over the barricade, a long Green River knife in his hand. Jay saw it gleam in the early morning sun as the French Canuck landed on the back of a retreating Lamonte bullwhacker.

Ledeaux's right arm rose and fell twice. There was blood on the long blade when the Frenchman came back. A man with a mop of bushy red hair lay on his face, the back of his dirty white shirt staining red. It was Flannigan.

"Hold your fire," Jay called. Lamonte and his men were retreating rapidly. They pulled up out of rifle range.

Malone sat down on the ground and wiped the sweat from his face. He looked at Jay Brandon and grinned. Ledeaux calmly wiped his knife on the leg of his pants.

"I reckon that'll hold 'em for a spell," Malone chuckled.

"They'll be back," Jay murmured. He sat down beside Priscilla Warburton. The girl's face was stained with gun powder.

"It was pretty close, Jay," she said.

The wagon master nodded. Three of his teamsters were dead and another eight wounded. They wouldn't be as strong for the next charge.

Out on the plain, Lamonte was having a conference with the Arapahoe chiefs.

"Them Injuns like to talk," Malone grinned. "I hope they talk all mornin'."

IT was another hour and a half before Lamonte could get his men lined up for another drive. Jay Brandon glanced up at the sun. It was still two hours before noon and Amos Gaunt wouldn't be able to get back before nightfall—if he got back at all!

"Whatever happens after this charge," Priscilla Warburton broke in on his thoughts, "I'll know one thing, Jay."

"What's that," Brandon asked curiously. He felt the blood sliding down his arm.

"You're a man," she said softly.

Jay grinned. "And you're a woman," he said. "A woman I'd like to see more of if we ever get out of here."

"If that were the only reason," Miss Warburton told him calmly. "I hope we make it."

Then Lamonte was coming again, the Arapahoes on the left and the white teamsters on the right—a long line of them, spreading out thinly as they kicked their mounts into a fast gallop.

In another moment they were moving at top speed, aiming again for the open end of the horseshoe. Jay Brandon crouched behind the barricade and fired steadily. He watched Lamonte, fired, and missed again. Directly behind the big man's shoulder, he thought he saw a movement up on the ridge.

Then the Arapahoes were down on them, screaming shrilly, driving their painted ponies straight for the gap. Jay emptied his six-shooter into a mob of them, knocking down four. He whipped another gun from his belt and then sprang over to where Priscilla Warburton was standing.

They were coming through now, kicking over the boxes and cases. The remaining Excelsior teamsters were all down at the breach, firing at the Arapahoes, dragging them from the saddles.

Lamonte himself hurdled the wall, charging his big chestnut animal straight at Jay Brandon. The Excelsior wagon master waited for him. He fired one shot at an Arapahoe with a lance, running for him. The Indian went down.

Lamonte had his gun out, his face was twisted, more devilish than that of the Indians. Tibbs Bragan leaped for the big man's bridle and tried to stop the horse.

Jay shot a bullet into the animal's chest, and the chestnut stumbled forward a few yards from him. Lamonte leaped clear of the saddle, landing like a cat on his feet. His gun was directed at the Excelsior wagon master when Jay squeezed the trigger.

The slug knocked Lamonte's gun arm down, the Colt falling to the ground. The big man scooped it up with his left hand and came in again on the run. The Colt barked and Jay felt the bullet slam into the wagon behind him. He shot, aiming for Lamonte's wide waist.

The bullet stopped Lamonte for a moment but he came on again like a great grizzly bear, reaching forward to hug his man. Jay squeezed the trigger and the hammer fell on an empty cylinder.

Lamonte piled on top of him, driving him to the ground. Then quite suddenly, the big man grew limp. Jay rolled him off. He saw death staring out of Lamonte's

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eyes. The hilt of a knife protruded from the big man's back as he lay on his face. Priscilla Warburton stood a few feet away, face white and terror-stricken.

Jay leaped forward and wrenched the Colt from Lamonte's fingers. He turned it on the men still coming through the gap. Directly behind them he saw a line of blue-coated riders. He heard Malone yelling insanely.

"Troopers!" the bullwhacker was roaring.

Amos Gaunt rode at the head of the column of blue-clad men. Another man rode with him. Jay Brandon stared. It was Sam Freeman!

The Arapahoes heard the shots behind them and continued riding toward the far end of the corral. They broke through between two of the wagons and fled across the plains.

Amos Gaunt threw himself from his horse and raced toward Jay Brandon. Lamonte's teamsters were trying to get away, but the troopers rounded them up quickly.

Jay sat down on a box, Lamonte's gun still in his hand. The fight was over.

"You all right, Brandon?" Gaunt yelled.

Jay grinned. He saw Priscilla Warburton still staring at the body of Black Jack Lamonte.

"You got back quick," he said to the scout.

"Met Freeman comin' up with the cavalry," Gaunt explained. "He rode all night to git to the fort."

Sam Freeman dismounted and strode toward him. "Permit me to explain a few things, Jay," he said quietly. "Gaunt says you were a little disappointed."

"He ain't no renegade," Gaunt chuckled. "Tell him, Freeman."

"The name's not Freeman," the man in buckskin smiled. "I'm Captain Charles McNeil of the Third Cavalry, United States Army."

"West Point man?" Jay asked.

McNeil nodded. "Colonel Taylor sent me to Nebraska City to investigate the trouble. I'll have a report for him when I get back which will ruin the firm of Lamonte, Darcy and Simmons."

"He was down at that conference with the Arapahoes," Gaunt went on, "tryin' to get 'em to keep out o' the fight. The older Arapahoe chiefs knew him from the fort. That's why they stayed out o' the fight. The young bucks weren't so smart."

"Lamonte tried to detain me," Captain McNeil smiled, "but I had a fast horse and I broke away from them. I'm glad you held them off as long as you did, Brandon."

Jay Brandon looked at Priscilla Warburton. "I'm kind of glad myself," he murmured. He walked over to the girl and then took her up toward the other end of the corral.

"It won't do any good looking at him," he said quietly. "Lamonte deserved it."

"I killed him," Priscilla Warburton whispered.

"He was dying," Jay told her, "with a bullet through his stomach. Your knife helped him out of his misery. Think of it that way."

"It helps," the girl admitted. They walked on in silence. Three men came toward them, one was limping.

"We can start rollin'," Malone said, "in about three hours, Jay."

Jay Brandon nodded. "Push it along," he said quietly.

Tibbs Bragan and Frenchy Ledeaux stared at the two as they walked past.

"I figger," Bragan wheezed, "that there'll be another partner in the firm of Excelsior afore long."

Ledeaux bobbed his head emphatically, his white teeth glistening. *"Oui, oui,"* the Frenchman chuckled.

Jay Brandon looked down at the girl. "I'm not asking to be your father's partner," he said slowly, "but I would like to be yours."

"Maybe we can arrange it," Priscilla Warburton smiled bravely.

"I'll count on it," Jay grinned. "The answer is 'yes?'"

"It couldn't be 'no,'" Priscilla whispered.

Jay Brandon called after Malone. "We start in two hours," he shouted. Malone scratched his head.

"What's the rush, boss?" he asked.

"I'm hoping there's a chaplain at the fort," Jay Brandon told him.

"Oh," Malone nodded. Then his eyes opened. "Oh!" he said again.

One of the young men held a tin cup. Walking Wolf coolly drew his knife.

THE WOOING OF BAPTISTE

By MARK HOWE

Never was there a stranger courtship than that of Baptiste Doriot, pauper of the beaver streams. Utes had taken his partner, his traps and his pelts, and there was no credit at the fur men's Rendezvous.

BAPTISTE DORIOT rode into the Rendezvous at Brown's Hole at the tail of Kit Carson's outfit with bitterness in his soul. To be sure, he was glad to be there, as well he might be. Meeting old friends who ranged the beaver streams from the Gila to the Yellowstone would be pleasant, but in spite of that he chewed the bitter cud of disappointment.

The size of Baptiste's pack of beaver

pelts was the cause of it all. Never before in his years of independent trapping had he appeared at Rendezvous with so little to show for his work. He knew it wasn't his fault, but nevertheless his soul was steeped in bitterness.

Too little beaver and too much Indian accounted for his state of mind. The fall before, he and his partner, Lafe Stevens, made a bad guess as to trapping grounds. The streams at the headwaters of the North Platte where they first set their traps yielded only a few pelts. Then, with the season half gone, they traveled fifty miles south to the upper Colorado. Here beaver were plentiful enough to glut the avarice of the most greedy man in the business. They built a small cabin in happy haste and settled themselves down to reap a rich harvest. But there was something else in that region besides beaver. Ute Indians, who fiercely resented the white man's invasion of their hunting grounds, were there also.

About noon one day when Baptiste was out doing double duty on the trap line they attacked the cabin where Lafe was laid up with a badly sprained ankle. He fought them off as long as he could, but soon went under. On his way home about dusk Baptiste heard the singing of the triumphant Indians, knew what it meant, and fled westward along the river. On the way he picked up half a dozen traps, all he dared to try to save.

For two days and night he rode without a halt except for a few minutes at a time to let his jaded pack-mule drink and graze. After a week's hard travel he reached the junction of the Colorado and Gunnison rivers, where he found Kit Carson, Lucien Maxwell, and a dozen others snugly cabined for the winter. With typical trapper hospitality they took him in, gave him food and shelter, and let him set his traps on the streams they were working.

The company of old friends was pleasant and the trapping good, but the season was nearly over. Already his hosts were talking about going to Rendezvous at Brown's Hole. By dint of much labor and a little help from his sympathetic friends Baptiste got all the pelts his mule could carry in addition to his own weight, but that was all. Compared to the catch the others had made, these were nothing. They would be in real money when they arrived at Rendezvous but he would have barely enough for a few additional traps, powder and lead, tobacco, and a little whiskey, which would have to be stretched to the farthest endurable limit by the addition of plain water.

Enfant de garce—how he hated diluted whiskey!

Although burning with thirst, he wisely postponed gratifying it until he had provided the necessities of his trade. Half a dozen traps, powder, lead, and tobacco cost so much he had to throw in his mule. By dint of much wheedling he managed to persuade trader William Bent to add a gallon jug of watery whiskey, providing he would bring the jug back when it was empty.

Forlorn and more bitter than ever, he sought the outskirts of the Rendezvous and built himself a shabby little wickiup, and buried his outfit beneath it. His first impulse was to empty the jug down his throat in the shortest possible time. That, he knew from past experience, was the surest means of forgetting his troubles and disappointments for a few hours. His better, wiser self, however, sternly interposed the remainder that there would positively be no more when that was gone. That caused him to institute a rigid system of rationing.

Next morning he set out to find a partner to take the place of Lafe Stevens; whose scalp was now being carefully dried in a Ute lodge. The kind of man he sought would probably be hard to find. One with plenty of cash or credit with William Bent, horses and pack-mules, and a generous disposition was needed. If he failed to find this man the only alternative was to hire himself out to some *bourgeois* like Thomas Fitzpatrick or Ewing Young.

Kit Carson was the first man he approached on the subject. "We-e-l-l, now Baptiste," drawled Kit, in his soft Kentucky voice, "I'm plumb sorry, but I reckon you're too late. My party's already made up. Soon as we're through tradin' we're lightin' out for the Yellowstone."

For three days Baptiste diligently interviewed everybody he knew and some he didn't, with only an occasional nip from the jug to bolster up his courage. What he feared became a stark reality. Nobody wanted to throw in with him and make up

the deficiencies in his outfit. Late in the afternoon of the third day of fruitless effort he crawled into his wickiup, flung himself upon his blankets, and growled out his disgust.

"Sacre enfants des garees!" he fumed. "Utes grande rascal. *Pouf!* I take his top-knot when once more we meet. Just like zat!"

When his rage had burned itself down to a puny, helpless resentment against everything and everybody, he crawled outside and sat down upon the ground beside the entrance. Now he noticed things in the vicinity had changed since morning. A band of Arapaho Indians had come in and pitched their lodges a hundred yards or so away near a creek bank. Although these particular savages had always been friendly to white men, he was now in no mood to remember that or give them credit for it.

"All Indian grande rascal!" he muttered, as he watched them going quietly about their business.

Presntly he saw his friend, old Six Feathers, sitting cross-legged beside the door of his lodge. *"Sacre!"* growled Baptiste, "he grand rascal too, but I go talk wit him anyhow."

SIX FEATHERS was glad to see him and made him sit down upon the ground for a pow-wow. For some time they sat there talking in a desultory fashion about the price of beaver, tobacco, whiskey, and how stingy William Bent was. Presently a young squaw walked past on her way to the creek with a tin kettle in her hand.

"Enfant de garce!" rumbled Baptiste softly, his black beard bristling with excitement. "What is her name?"

Six Feathers chuckled understandingly. He well knew the ways of men, especially mountain men. "Unami," he replied. "Daughter of Eagle Head."

Baptiste spoke quickly.

"Married?"

The old Indian knew this would be the next question. "No," said he sourly. "Won't look at Arapaho warrior."

Bidding his friend a somewhat hasty and unceremonious goodbye, Baptiste casually sauntered down toward the creek. Six Feathers watched him for a moment, an amused expression in his crafty old eyes, then grunted sarcastically, got up and went inside his lodge.

At the creek Baptiste found Unami sitting upon a stone peering at her face as mirrored in the water. Boldly sitting down beside her, he also looked at the image. "You are ze prettiest squaw I ever saw," he remarked in a mixture of French and bad Arapaho.

Unami's only reply was a delighted giggle.

Thus encouraged, Baptiste pursued his line of thought. "You make ze lodge warm," he complimented.

"Does Black Beard think so?" she coyly inquired.

"Certainment," was the enthusiastic reply. "You make ze robe soft with little fingers. Ze lodge you keep for your man will be warm and clean."

Unami dipped her kettle into the water, rose to her feet, and made as if to go.

"You come back in ze morning?" pleaded Baptiste.

The girl made no reply, but laughed self consciously, and walked up the bank.

At the top she stopped to look back over her shoulder with eyes which set the trapper's soul aflame, "In ze morning? At evening, at zis time?" He no longer invited. He implored.

Unami's eyes dreamily caressed his figure for an instant. "In the morning. When the sun peeps over the mountain I come here for water. If Black Beard is on hand Unami can't help it if he looks at her."

For the first time since the Utes rubbed out Lafe Stevens, Baptiste was his usual gay, carefree self. As he walked toward the center of the Rendezvous where William Bent's tent stood he hummed a gay chanson to himself. While he sang he revolved matters swiftly in his mind.

Never before had he been inclined to take a squaw into his lodge. Now his volatile, impulsive nature responded to every glance, movement, and line of the Indian girl's body. With him an impulse was usually a brief prelude to action. He had looked upon Unami, found her delectable, and that ended the matter. He would have her for his wife.

To his great satisfaction he found William Bent in his tent alone. *"Monsieur* Bent," he said, with simple directness, "the Utes kill my partner and steal ze furs.

I ride and ride. My mule nearly drop. Then one day, *voila,* there is Kit Carson. He take poor Baptiste in and show him where to set ze trap. Catch a few beaver—bring heem in and trade wit you. Got plenty powder, lead, and tobac but no horse. It ees long way to trap country. Baptiste feet get tired. Will *Monsieur* Bent let him have two horse and two mules on ze credit 'til next Rendezvous?"

William Bent's kindly eyes twinkled humorously. "I've heard at least twenty other stories of that kind," he said. "There's Tom Wheeler, Jack Smith, and a whole passel of others in the same fix. They say they're broke too."

Baptiste's heart turned to lead in his bosom. "But *Monsieur* Bent," he exclaimed, "you have let Baptiste have ze credit before and lost nozzing. He pay his debts like a *bourgeois.*"

"I stake nobody except married men," explained Bent. "So you see that lets you out."

Baptiste's eyes narrowed. "You give Baptiste ze credit if he had ze squaw to keep his lodge?" he inquired.

William Bent slid headlong into a trap of whose existence he knew nothing. "Yes," he chuckled. "If you had a squaw you could have two horses and a couple of pack-mules."

Baptiste leaped into the air, landed alongside the trader, seized him in a bear-like hug and planted a kiss upon either cheek.

"Sacre," he crowed. "You are one grande *bourgeois.*"

As the happy French-Canadian walked out of the tent Bent flung another word after him. "Remember now," he warned, "no squaw, no horse."

"Oui," laughed Baptiste. "I onnerstand."

Next morning he met Unami at the usual place on the creek, where it took a long time to fill the kettle with water. They met in the same place again late in the afternoon, and that night they sat upon the ground near the creek bank under Baptiste's blanket for a long time. Thus matters went for ten days. Then he decided it was time to bring matters to an issue. Back to William Bent he went.

"One horse now," he pleaded, "ze ozzer and ze mules when I am ready to go to trap country."

The trader was adamant. No wife, no horse. Poor Baptiste was in a bad fix. Since savage etiquette demanded a price for Unami, he had to do something. With William Bent in his present mood there was nothing to do except to go on a hunt, although pelts were not at their best at that season. That night he dug up his outfit, made it into a pack, and was off at dawn the next day.

For almost a month he hunted and trapped with feverish energy. When he was ready to go back to the Rendezvous he cached his outfit, shouldered his pelts, and set out. On the night after his arrival he carried his bundle of second-rate pelts to Eagle Head's lodge, placed them just inside the entrance, then crossed to the far side and sat down beside Unami.

As Eagle Head undid the bundle and critically examine its contents the young people watched him eagerly. Baptiste found Unami's hand and held it tight. If the offering of pelts was satisfactory Eagle Head would throw his buffalo robe over their heads and they would be man and wife. If it were not, he would throw the bundle outside.

To the young people it seemed that Eagle Head would never complete his inspection. They scarcely breathed as they waited. Presently he rose, uttered a deep grunt of dissatisfaction, and kicked the bundle through the doorway. The young people's hands slowly untwined and Baptiste rose to go.

"Courage, my little one," he murmured, "I hunt some more."

Eagle Head turned his back upon the suitor as he walked across the lodge. Outside Baptiste met Walking Wolf, Unami's brother. "My father is not pleased?" inquired the young warrior, as he watched Baptiste gather up his pelts.

"Sacre!" growled Baptiste. "He ees vair mooch angry."

"More pelts will help," suggested Walking Wolf. He had always been fond of the French-Canadian.

"That is what I onnerstand," dryly commented Baptiste, as he walked disconsolately away.

NEXT morning long before dawn Baptiste was on his way back to his cache. Bitter indeed were his thoughts now, for before he could collect another

lot of pelts and return William Bent might go back to his fort on the Arkansas River. Or the Arapahos might take it into their heads to move. If either happened his chance of winning Unami would be gone for another year at least, if not altogether.

Still in a bitter frame of mind, he reached his cache, dug up his outfit, and began to set his traps again. The stream he had chosen for operations led back into a narrow, thickly wooded gorge he had never visited before. While making his rounds one morning nearly a month later he went farther than usual. In a little nook he found a lodge containing a green buffalo head, six tin kettles, an equal number of blankets and a pile of perhaps three dozen green beaver pelts. From the poles hung a variety of articles, including a large red pipe, several bows and quivers of arrows, half a dozen flint hatchets, and a like number of round bull-hide shields.

A single glance sufficed to identify the place as a medicine lodge erected by Arapaho young men who were out to win the right to be called warriors. The articles were offerings, and the lodge, together with all it contained, was held sacred. The penalty for disturbing it in any fashion was death.

Baptiste gazed upon the contents of the lodge with something more than curiosity. Here were riches far greater than any he might hope to secure in the short time remaining to him. Apparently, no one was near, and the young men to whom it belonged might not return for days. Why not—?

Baptiste's wayward meditations were rudely interrupted by a hand upon his shoulder. Leaping to one side, he whipped out his knife and whirled to face whoever the owner of it might be. To his astonishment he found himself looking into the smiling face of Walking Wolf.

"Black Beard is very nervous," remarked the Indian lad. "He also rises early."

Baptiste sheathed his knife and advanced with outstretched hand. *"Oui,"* he replied. "I rise early because I sleep in a lonely lodge. If I had your sister for ze wife I would not have to go out before ze sun comes up."

Walking Wolf gravely took the outstretched hand. A moment later half a dozen other young Arapahos entered the lodge and shook hands with him. He could also hear the voices of others outside.

"What brings the young Arapahos into ze mountains?" inquired Baptiste.

"We have vowed to the Great Spirit that we will be men and warriors," explained Walking Wolf, "but our hatchets have not yet been raised against an enemy. The cowardly Blackfeet are dogs. They hide in their holes. We cannot go home until we have sprinkled our blankets with the blood of an enemy."

Baptiste understood all this, but did not like the sound of it. He well knew that young men bent upon such a mission were not averse to straining a few points in one way or another. For the moment they were friendly enough, but he was white, and they wanted to go home.

"Come with us," invited Walking Wolf, "and share our poor lodge. It is not far off."

Baptiste was reluctant to accept the invitation, but there was no way to avoid it. To decline would give offense. Seeing their apparent mood he had no wish to injure their feelings. Since there was nothing else to do he followed his hosts, whom he found to be about twenty in number, to their camp farther up the gorge. Upon arriving there they sat about roasting a deer some of them had brought in.

During the remainder of the day they lounged about camp. Baptiste thought of his traps, but there was no way of escaping his hosts without causing trouble. Along in the afternoon he noticed that something was wrong. Many whispered conversations were held by the young men and an air of hositility pervaded the place. When he could bear it no longer he approached Walking Wolf, who sat apart from the others upon a log.

"Why have ze hearts of ze Arapahos grown cold toward me?" he inquired.

"They are far from home, and their vows are unfulfilled," replied Walking Wolf bluntly. "Your skin is white. Therefore you are an enemy. They say we should kill you, sprinkle your blood upon our blankets and go back."

Poor Baptiste was paralyzed with horror at this. "But ze Arapahos are my friends," he protested. "Surely zey would not think of such a thing."

"I have spoken," said Walking Wolf.

Baptiste swiftly revolved the situation in his mind. His rifle lay upon the opposite side of the camp. Between him and it sat the young men. Strategy, therefore, was his only reliance.

"Look, Walking Wolf," said he softly. "My heart is heavy because ze Araphahos have not stained their blankets. Let me help zem. If zey kill me zey will fulfill ze vow, but zey will kill a brother who loves zem. Zat is not good. Let me give a bit of my blood zat zey may go home and find wives. I will take Unami and everybody will be happy."

Walking Wolf sat as though he had not heard, while the others put their heads close together. Suddenly they rose, whipped out their knives and walked toward Baptiste. The French-Canadian, knowing the dread moment had come, seized his knife with a determination to fight to the last.

WALKING WOLF also rose to his feet. "Brothers!" he shouted. "Wait a moment. Hear me! The Arapahos are brave, but a cloud has come between them and the sun. We cannot find the Blackfeet and there are no scalps in our medicine lodge. Today the Great Spirit is kind. He sent us a white man, a friend, who is the suitor for Unami. If you kill him she will weep, and all Arapaho maidens will weep with her. They will be so angry with us we cannot find wives. The old men will laugh at us and say we were afraid to trail an enemy and lifted our hands against a friend."

"But our vow?" cried one of the young men. "We cannot go home without sprinkling the blood of an enemy upon our blankets. Here is one. Let us kill him and be off."

A chorus of assenting howls was raised at this. Once more they started forward.

"Wait!" commanded Walking Wolf. "I have not forgotten our vow. If you will listen to me we can fulfill it and all go home with light hearts. Black Beard is very full of blood. He can easily spare enough to stain all our blankets. When that is done we will go home."

After a moment's silence the young men burst into a gabble of talk. Presntly they all put their knives away and one of them stepped forward. "It is good," said he. "We will do as you say."

Preparations for instantly putting the project into effect were made. One of the young men ran for a tin cup while Baptiste heroically bared his left arm. Walking Wolf coolly pinched up the skin some three inches below the elbow and deftly drew his razor-edged knife across it. From an inch-long wound the blood spurted freely into the tin cup.

When the vessel was two-thirds full Walking Wolf motioned them away. Baptiste placed a wad of tobacco upon the wound and bound it with a strip of soft deer-skin. Then they tenderly led him to the medicine lodge where they made him a bed of buffalo robes. The young men spent the remainder of the afternoon in making preparations for a celebration.

That night the young braves danced the age-old ceremony to honor the shedding of the blood of an enemy for the first time. About the hour of midnight they completed it and sought their beds, exhausted in body but exalted in mind. Next morning they were astir at an early hour, making preparations to return home. Baptiste watched them with a feeling of loneliness in his heart. After all, now that the matter of his being an enemy was settled, he regretted to see them go. It would be very lonely without them.

Just before setting out for home the young warriors held a low-voiced conversation. When they were through they went away toward the medicine lodge, leading one of the horses. After about an hour's absence they returned with the lodge and its contents upon the animal's back. Taking it to where Baptiste sat dejectedly upon a log, Walking Wolf spoke for all of them.

"Black Beard has been very good to us and our hearts are warm toward him," said he. "We beg him to accept this horse and what is upon his back as proof of our love for him."

Baptiste was dazzled, for this gift represented more wealth than the results of a whole season's trapping on the best stream in the mountains. Now he could go back to the Rendezvous and claim Unami. "My brothers are generous," he said. "If zey will wait for me to gather up ze traps I will go home wit zem."

For the remainder of the day everybody worked diligently getting Baptiste's outfit together. When night came on they set guards about the camp, rolled up in blankets, and slept like wolverines. When they set out for home the next morning his heart sang with joy every time he thought about the riches upon the back of his newly acquired horse.

When he arrived at the Rendezvous he was made still happier by learning that both William Bent and the Arapahos were still there. That night he tethered his horse outside Eagle Head's lodge, went inside and sat down beside Unami. In due course of time, which seemed long to the lovers, Eagle Head leisurely got to his feet and went outside to inspect the animal.

For fully three-quarters of an hour he viewed the animal from every angle. During this time Baptiste and Unami leaned heavily against each other with fingers interlocked. To them it seemed he never would return to announce his decision. They grew numb and ceased to think. Time, the world of events—everything seemed to fade into a blur.

Unami's eyes glowed with hope.

When Eagle Head reappeared he seemed unreal to Baptiste—a phantom moving in a tenuous fog. With slow, dignified tread, his arms crossed upon his bosom, he crossed the lodge and stood directly over them. For a moment he stood there like some lofty, cloud-crested mountain peak. Then with unhurried movement he unfolded his arms and extended them benignly over the young people.

"It is good, my children," he said, in deep tones. "May the Great Spirit watch over your lodge."

Having said this he removed his robe from his shoulders, swung it out upon the air, and allowed it to settle upon their heads like a gentle benediction. As the soft, caressing folds shut the lovers into a world entirely their own, Eagle Head quitted the lodge, lowered the flap at the entrance, and securely fastened it. With a feeling of joyous contentment in his heart, which must have been akin to that which filled the Great Spirit after he brought the first man and woman together, he untied the horse and led it away.

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CATTLE KATE

By JEROME PARKER

A Frontier Outlaw Feature

Only the owlhoot brotherhood knew that pretty Ella Watson's lonely cabin was the clearing house for a rustler crew.

Ella drew her gun. "I'll kill the man who opens that gate!"

VELVET-BLACK NIGHT softly smothered Sweetwater Valley, a thousand stars flashed their glittering points all across the heavens and off the plain there came the sharp, sweet smell of sage, heavy in this thin air.

Lamplight, butter-yellow, spilled out of the windows of a single lonely cabin set in the middle of the prairie. A woman came out of this cabin, backed against its wall, waiting. She carried a Winchester. The sound she had heard grew—the low thunder of a fast-traveling herd of cattle. Presently the bunched cattle, mostly calves, drifted into the yard, held in a tight circle by three riders. One of them moved forward, calling, "Ella?"

The woman spoke with authority. "It's all right, Luke. Have your boys put the stuff in the corral. They can brand 'em in the morning."

The man Luke dropped a few short sentences to his riders, whereupon they circled the cabin, driving the cattle ahead of them, into the corral back of the cabin. Afterward Luke came to Ella Watson. He was chuckling at some secret joke: he did not get down. "Some of Durbin's stuff," he said. Then, "Jim up at the store?", and receiving the woman's answer explained, "Want to talk with him. Be down in the mornin'," and moved off with his riders.

Before she went into the cabin Ella Watson took a turn around the corral, smiling to herself as she viewed, by lantern light, the wealth represented here under the soft, silky coats of the young calves.

This was the Sweetwater Valley, Wyoming Territory, in the spring of 1889. Ella Watson and Jim Averell were partners in one of the most audacious and ingenious rustling schemes ever fostered on the range.

Jim Averell, clever and completely unscrupulous, kept a store, post office and saloon in the valley. He was also a sagebrush politician, representing the little ranchers and homesteaders in their fight against the cattle barons—men he termed "land sharks." Privately Averell had no true sentiment in the matter. He stood ready to profit whichever way the decision should fall. It might be that the cattle kings would pay well to rid themselves of such a trouble-maker. Or, and with each

day Averell thought this the more likely turn, the small stockmen would gain power granting him a high position as a leader of their faction.

Ella Watson was Averell's cover-up in the rustling game with which he marked time. A pretty and warm-hearted and reckless woman of the frontier cow-towns, she had drifted to a Cheyenne dance hall where Averell met her in his search for a woman to aid his plan. Averell could be agreeable and entertaining; he had a cloak of charm and culture that captured Ella.

Back to the Sweetwater came Ella to set up a "hog ranch" in the valley. She took cows in payment if money was lacking and in its easy tolerance the cow country of Wyoming gave her the cognomen of Cattle Kate. It was afterward to have a sinister meaning.

For Ella's corral served as a clearing house for the rustlers on Jim Averell's payroll. The stolen stock was mixed with that taken in trade and though the enclosure was always filled with twenty to fifty animals bearing various brands no suspicion was attached to the fact since the manner in which Ella conducted her business was well known. She had no competition for fifty miles around and the country held a large population of salty cowhands. There were times when she had one or two girls to assist in the entertainment. Occasional shooting scrapes arose but Ella was handy enough with a six-gun to show her rambunctious customers that she meant business.

Hank Wheeler allowed himself a chuckle. "Better start shootin'!"

ELLA WATSON rose early to watch the branding. She dressed quickly. Standing before her mirror, she was pleased with what she saw there. She was a pretty and disturbing woman, deep-bosomed and broad-hipped.

It was when she was buckling on her six-gun, pondering her need for it, that her old doubts came back. That the valley was becoming suspicious she knew. As she dashed over the prairie in her shiny new buggy, dressed in gay silks of the latest Eastern fashion, or atop her fine blooded saddle horse, she could not help but observe the dark looks of her neighbors; the sullen muttering of the hard-worked men, the jealous and hostile glances of the women. At the time she flouted them with a toss of her head but later, alone, she was not so sure of herself.

This reverie was cut short by the clip-clop announcement of riders coming into the yard. She gave a final pat to her hair, smoothed her long skirt and went to the door, expecting to see Jim Averell and Luke and his men. There was a lift to the anticipation but she was disappointed.

She found the riders, four of them, sitting their horses by the corral, sliding their glances in and out among the bawling animals. These were Hank Wheeler, foreman for John Durbin, and three hands; they were grim and deeply angry.

Hank Wheeler declared, "Ella, our calf herd was raided last night an' we have

reason to think the stock was driven here. Whut you know about it?"

Ella Watson maintained her tough calm. The six-gun was a reassuring weight on her hip. She answered. "I know nothing about it. These are my cattle and this is my land. You're trespassin'. Clear out!"

Hank Wheeler grinned without humor. "We have put up with you long enough, Ella. It is time for the cattlemen in this valley to act!"

Then he seemed angry with himself for having said too much. He made an impatient gesture, said to one of his hands, "Open up thet gate, Ben. We'll drive this stuff home with us."

Ella Watson's command halted the man before he left the saddle. Her voice was just loud enough to be heard and there was a quality in it that made all these men stare at her as though they had seen her for the first time.

"I'll kill the man who touches that gate!"

Hank Wheeler allowed himself a chuckle. "Never mind, Ben. I'll tend to it myself."

He got down slowly, stretched when he was on the ground, commenced rolling a cigarette, letting the lapse of time play on the woman's nerves. He touched a match to the brown quirly, regarded the first stream of smoke thoughtfully, drawled, "Better start shootin', Ella," and walked with deliberately slow steps toward the corral gate.

When his hand was on the rawhide strips that held the gate shut Ella Watson murmured, "You're a fool, Hank!" and drew her gun without haste and fired, hitting the foreman in the shoulder, which was her intention.

The heavy bullet knocked Hank Wheeler backward, spilling him in the dust. He rose to his knees, clutching at his shoulder, cursing. Pain twisted his face. The other three punchers fought their frightened horses around the yard.

"Damn you. Ella, damn you!"

Wheeler said it over and over, unable to think of anything else. Ella Watson exclaimed, watching his men, "Get on your horse, Hank, and get out of here. Maybe next time I won't feel so charitable!"

One of the hands helped Wheeler to mount. He pulled his horse around, flinging at Ella Watson a look of pure hatred, crying out, "A woman like you deserves no pity. An' you will get none when the time comes!"

Then they were gone in a skittering cloud of dust.

Reaction seized Ella Watson, turned her faint and weak, made the gun a dead weight in her hand. She sat down on a rude bench by the cabin, holding the gun in her lap. As she remembered Hank Wheeler's warning some of the brightness went out of the day for her, made her long for the sight of Jim Averell, long to hear his reassuring promises for the future.

She was like this, caught by faint dreams, when Jim Averell and Luke and the other men of the night before trotted into the yard. Averell, noticing the gun, her white face, went to her immediately, asking "Honey, what's wrong?"

He was a tall, blond, half-handsome man, with features a trifle sharp and muddy-colored eyes that somehow, without being shifty, did not inspire trust. But he was an educated man of some culture and one who, on the rough frontier, could easily find favor with women. Ella Watson loved him completely. She said now, "Hank Wheeler and some of his men were here. They were going to drive off the stock. I had to shoot Wheeler." She shivered a little.

Jim Averell, who played his part with this woman with an actor's finesse, showed deep concern. He cursed Durbin and Durbin's outfit, swore vengeance by increased raids on Durbin's stock. Mentally he congratulated himself on choosing such a capable partner for his rustling scheme.

He murmured, "You're upset. You need a drink," he took her into the cabin with him.

The liquor brought color back to Ella Watson's cheeks, loosened her, made her regard Averell with fond, half-shut eyes. He was stirred by her and took her in his arms, whispering, "You're wonderful, Ella!"

He saw her eyes widen, her lips part a little; the heady fragrance of her hair was all about him. He kissed her.

Outside, the man Luke carried on the branding. He gave a broad wink to his helpers.

SUMMER saw Averell continue his calf raids with success. Then, in June, he led his men on a daring foray against Rob Connor's ranch. On a clear, moonlit night, they swooped down on Connor's herd, ready to carry out their usual business of shooting the cows and driving off the youngsters.

But the herd turned out to be too well guarded. It was, actually, an ambush, and Averell lost two of his men, brought back a third wounded, lashed across his saddle. Near dawn after a long running fight, they reached Ella Watson's cabin.

Ella ran out to them, experiencing a thrill of fear as she saw the wounded man dragged from his saddle. Then she saw Jim Averell and ran to him. "Jim, what happened?"

Averell forgot his pose. He jerked a thumb at the man being carried inside, answered curtly: "What does it look like? There was a fight. We had to run for it."

Ella Watson asked humbly, "Who was hit?" She knew most of these men and liked them and performed small tasks for them.

"A new man—Pete Rivers."

She received this soberly. "I'll see what I can do for him."

They had lain the man in a wall bunk and Luke and another man were standing by him, undecided what to do. Ella Watson pushed them aside.

"Get me some hot water. It's on the stove in the back room. And some clean linen from the cabinet under the window. Hurry."

The men responded to her orders, moving clumsily in their haste. Averell paced up and down the room, never giving the wounded man a look.

Ella watson knew as soon as she bent over the man that he was beyond hope. Sight of the dark, gaping hole in his chest, its welling fountain of blood, paralyzed her for a moment. With quick skill she attempted to staunch the flow. Almost tenderly she smoothed back the damp hair from the closed eyes. However her life on the frontier, in the raw cowtowns, had hardened her, it had not inured her to the sight of death and suffering.

She took the hot water and cloths when they came, tried to clean and bandage the wound. Jim Averell's voice, talking to Luke, reached her as she worked.

He was in a temper, unusual for him, and smashed a fist into his palm to emphasize his talk.

"Something went wrong, they knew we were coming. They were waiting for us. It was a perfect ambush!"

Ella Watson caught herself wondering with him, and then, as she ripped away the man's shirt to get a better view of the wound, she found the badge. It came loose in her hand, lay glittering in her palm, riveting her fascinated gaze. She read the lettering on it—tracing the words out with soundless lips. *Wyoming Stockgrowers Association, Cheyenne. Stock Detective.* Memory flooded her brain; she remembered stories she had heard of these mysterious, private lawmen — this man was a range detective!

She became aware of a strange hush in the room. A shadow fell across the bunk and she looked up to discover Jim Averell's burning gaze bent upon her. "Give it to me!" he demanded harshly, and she handed up the badge without question.

He was laughing exultantly as he showed the badge around, his laughter riding the exclamations of amazement from his crew, but there was something in the laugh that Ella Watson did not like. She could not remember ever having seen him this way, so completely full of anger—of anger overlaid with fear.

"Here's our answer!" he exclaimed. "A spy for the cattlemen riding with us! A range detective! He tipped them off, let them know we were coming. And they have saved us the trouble of shooting him!"

Ella Watson received a shock when she turned back to the man in the bunk. His eyes were open, looking beyond her at the knot of men under the oil lamp. His gaze dropped to her. He coughed a little and crimson froth brightened the stubble of his beard. He spoke in a very low voice:

"You must be Cattle Kate?"

She nodded.

He managed a grin. "You don't look half as bad as you're painted. They told me in Cheyenne you had horns!"

She smiled in spite of herself.

"They know what I am?" He turned his head to one side.

She said, "Yes," in a very small voice.

He closed his eyes as if gathering his strength for the effort of talking.

"That don't matter now. My job is finished. I'm obliged, ma'am, for your kind attention. Maybe I can repay it. There is somethin' you ought to know about Jim Averell. . . ."

She was hauled abruptly, viciously, to her feet, meeting the full, terrible impact of the malevolent hatred in Jim Averell's look, the murderous fury in the depths of his strange-colored eyes.

"Keep away from that treacherous dog," he hissed, "until I've decided what to do with him!"

He threw her into one of the rawhide-backed chairs, continued his pacing up and down the room.

With an effort Averell reached for control. Almost casually he forced himself to say, "Luke, you and Jim get a spade, dig a grave. We'll bury him!"

Horror flickered in Ella Watson's eyes; she sat on the edge of the chair, still holding a bloody piece of linen; her dress was blood-stained.

It was the first time she had ever seen the man Luke show surprise. He showed it now, surprise and something else, a thinly disguised contempt.

"He ain't dead yet!"

Averell looked at Luke pityingly. Then, while an unvoiced scream bubbled in Ella Watson's throat, he walked over to the bunk, looked down at the man there, drew his gun and targeted the muzzle between the eyes. Flame gouted from the barrel, the explosion rocked the little room, setting up ringing echoes, powder smoke made its stench. The man's face was burned black from the blast. His eyes remained open.

Averell sheathed the gun, said to Luke. "That make you feel better?"

Luke ignored him deliberately, signaled to the other two men. They rolled the body in a blanket and went out. Luke rummaged in the back room until he found a shovel. He took up a lantern and followed them.

Ella Watson sat staring with unseeing eyes at the bunk where the man had lain. She felt she was going to lose her reason. This sudden, blinding, brain-searing revelation of Jim Averell's character tore at her sanity. She stood in the corner until Luke and his men came back, until they all left, until she couldn't hear the sound of their horses any more.

Riding home in the dark, Jim Averell felt the condensed hostility of his men. He had earned their contempt, and except for the man Luke, their fear. His sway over them was seriously upset; his rustling game about finished.

He did not feel much regret. He was almost a cattle baron himself now—rich in both land and beef. He allowed himself a thin, mirthless smile; yes, a very rich man, thanks to the skilful protection of Ella Watson. But he did not consider that.

THERE was a lean-to in back of the cabin where Ella kept her horse. She saddled the black mare in man-time, held the animal for a moment and then let it have its morning run up the road toward Jim's store.

A strange silence hung over the Averell buildings. As she opened the door to the saloon the charged tension of the room hit her with the force of an electric shock. This was the breathless, hushed moment preceding a gun-fight—a moment when men's hate seemed to draw all life out of the air, leaving a vacuum without measured time.

There were two or three loungers at the poker table, riveted to their seats, and another man at one end of the bar, half-bent and white-faced.

Jim Averell, pale and with thin-drawn lips, stood behind the bar; both his hands were palm-flat on the walnut top. Her glance flicked to him instantly, then back to the other central figure in that scene. The man Luke stood in the center of the square room, crouching, shoulders hunched forward, eyes pinned to Averell. Without looking at her he said to the woman, "Stay out o' this, Ella."

She had never used her gun before except to wound a man. But she could not bluff this out. She managed to say quite calmly:

"He's my man, Luke. If you get him you'll have to get me, too." She reached for her gun.

Surprise and annoyance showed on Luke's face; he made a half-turn toward

Ella, remembered Averell and realized his error all in one moment, and tried to swing back.

But Averell's Colt was booming, the muzzle just lifted over the top of the bar, making a little orange blossom there, and the heavy bullet caught Luke in the chest, pushing him around so that he faced Ella Watson.

Hate and death-pain contorted the man's features. His own gun was out and he tried grimly to steady it on the woman. Ella Watson, eyes sprung wide, shuddered and fired.

She recoiled as the man's body crashed at her feet. Pale and shaken, visibly shocked, her life had not so coarsened Ella Watson that she could look on death unmoved.

Averell came swiftly from behind the bar, soothing her with low and gentle words, signaling the men in the room to get rid of the body.

He took her into the back room that served as his office, made her swallow a double finger of whiskey. Color flooded back into her cheeks, but an unforgetful look remained in her eyes. "What happened, Jim?" she asked quietly.

Averell's close brush with death had unnerved him. He knew that only Ella Watson's arrival had saved him. It was always irritating to him when things seemed out of his control. He was very terse.

"Luke figured to run the outfit. He picked a quarrel with me and went to shoot it out."

The liquor had loosened Ella Watson. She sat staring moodily ahead. Somewhere along the line she had dropped most of her finer instincts but she had never killed a man. The magic was out of this game, all the fun and secret laughter of outwitting the cattle barons. The thoughts she kept locked in the back of her brain came crowding forward. She had loved life too well, this girl, and tasted too deeply of its many pleasures and disappointments and had watched too many little dreams die. She was definitely afraid now and fearful of the future. The open hostility of the country, the revolt in their own outfit, both emphasized the treacherous angles of Jim Averell's schemes.

She looked up at him, curious to see what effect all this was having upon him, wondering why there had been no expression of gratitude from him, and discovered his eyes bent on her in a fierce, cruel glare.

Averell, near to fathoming her thoughts, caught himself in time. He smiled and the ruthless look of his face vanished so quickly she half thought she had imagined it.

"Honey, I'm sorry! I'd probably be dead now, wasn't for you. You don't know what I went through facin' Luke down, knowin' how handy he was with a gun. I thought—I thought I'd never see you again!"

These were the right words. They reached Ella Watson, they drew her to him. She rose and put her hands lightly on his chest. "Did you, Jim, did you?"

He bent and kissed her. Though he did not love her he was surprised at the passion she always stirred in him. The fact remained she was a beautiful woman, with a certain richness that her hard life had not dissolved. It was, he reflected, a very easy and pleasant part to play.

Ella Watson disengaged herself, asking a disconcerting question. "Jim, when are we going to be married? You have promised for so long!"

Averell met that question head-on, matching her own eagerness. "Soon, Ella, soon. I'm going to expand the business—ride with the boys myself. A few more months of calf raiding and we'll be set for life. Then we can go to Cheyenne, get married and maybe go back East on our wedding trip."

Ella Watson's face glowed, her eyes shone as she pictured the dream. For a little while all her doubts and fears were dispelled.

AVERELL had plans for Cattle Kate. He wanted to devote his full time to the sagebrush politics of the country, wanted to see what he could get out of the feud between the big and little cattlemen. He needed a clear name to do this and he was already under suspicion.

But Ella Watson was under deeper suspicion! At his listening post in the valley Jim Averell had heard the rumors, the many and sometimes incredible stories of Cattle Kate Watson's purported villainies. Stories of her seduction of innocent cow-

boys, of how she forced them into her rustler band. He had done nothing at the time but keep these stories from Ella Watson's ears. Indeed, he had nourished them, adding a few of his own, realizing vaguely that he was building something for the future. Now he blessed that foresight.

He would make another—his last—calf raid, and this time leave a broad trail all the way back to Ella Watson's corral. An easy trail that the cattlemen would surely follow, for it would be a specially injurious raid. Cattle Kate Watson would be exposed as queen of the outlaws! He chuckled briefly and the men riding with him turned to look at him curiously. He was glad they could not see his face. Jim Averell was feeling very well pleased with himself.

Averell carried out the raid, and it was, as he had planned, a particularly reckless and nose-thumbing one. And it seriously depleted A. J. Bothwell's spring crop of calves.

Stiff and weary and dusty Averell stood alone in his bar after the raid. He poured himself a drink, grateful for the warmth in this pre-dawn chill, and reviewed a good deal of his past. He was struck by the sudden urgency of Ella Watson's demands upon him. In a way it touched his vanity. Last night, when he had run the Bothwell calves into her corral, she had not even come out. He lifted a silent toast, muttering, "So long, Ella!" Afterward he stumbled into the back room, found his bed, eased off his boots. Wanted to get a couple of hours' sleep before he left for that stockman-granger meeting in Rawlins.

Ella Watson awoke on the morning of July 20 bathed in a cold sweat. There had been a dream the night before in which Jim Averell came toward her with a rope. She had felt a nameless dread and turned to run. But her way had been blocked on all sides by grinning herds of young calves,

She sat now on the edge of the bed, staring moodily ahead, hair sleep-tumbled about her face. The sordid edges of her life crept in on her and she was afraid.

Heavy-hearted, she dressed slowly, trying to think out her future, wondering what was going to become of her in this country. She reached for the small riding boots she usually wore but they looked uncomfortable today. She put on a pair of moccasins she had worked for Jim Averell.

At this moment she heard the horses and the spring wagon coming up the road and remembered the calves Jim Averell had put in her corral the night before.

AVERELL and his men had made the mistake of taking calves that Bothwell had personally marked as the prize of the crop. He had stored their appearance in his mind and knew them as well as a man knows his own dogs from his neighbor's.

Seven men rode up to the Watson corral. These seven were the cattle kings of the valley—Bob Connor, John Durbin, Bothwell and four others. They brought a spring wagon with them.

Bothwell circled the corral and sounded an outraged bellow.

"Them's my calves, John!" he shouted.

The wire around the enclosure was cut and the herd driven out. Ella Watson, blazing with anger, ran out to face this threat.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? That's my beef and this is my land. Get off it. I've worked hard for it and took it honest, which is more than you sagebrush pirates can say!"

She had recognized her callers as the big men of the valley and was a bristling, furious figure. Suddenly she remembered she was unarmed and made for the cabin and her six-guns on the dead run.

"Head 'er off!" yelled Bothwell, but Bob Connor and Ernest MacLain, guessing her intention, leaped from their saddles and caught her before she reached the door.

Ella's struggles were brief for she prudently realized the odds against her. In a somewhat petulant tone she demanded where they were taking her.

"Ella," said stern John Durbin, a religious and justice-loving man, "your game with Jim Averell is done. We know the true purpose of this sinful establishment. You and Jim must leave the country."

Ella flung back her head in a scornful laugh, her eyes flashed. "You make me sick, you sanctimonious land crooks. Leave the country? When Jim Averell and the little ranchers hear of this you fellows will

be lucky to get out of the Sweetwater with whole hides. Why, the pack of you ain't enough to take Jim Averell!"

Durbin shook his head.

At this moment there was a commotion near the corral. A young boy, messenger for Ella and Jim, was trying to catch up a horse and mount. He was quickly captured and the party headed up the road toward Averell's store and saloon. It was a hot afternoon that turned men's shirts dark with sweat and a heavy golden haze of dust traveled constantly with them.

Averell was just starting for Casper and had dismounted to close the first gate and open the second in his fenced pasture.

"We have a warrant for your arrest, Averell!" one of them exclaimed.

"Let's see it," replied Jim.

Durbin and Bothwell flashed their Colts. Quietly from Durbin: "We reckon this is warrant enough, Jim. Come along with us."

Averell's jaunty composure did not desert him. He mounted to the spring wagon and reassured Ella, also treating his captors to his opinion of what would happen to them for this unlawful action. Neither he nor Ella, nor for that matter any member of the party, clearly foresaw the terrible end of this ride.

ON up the Sweetwater road lumbered the wagon, with the riders jogging beside it. There was a lot of argument and talk passing among the cattlemen. They were worrying things over in their minds, trying to decide what to do with the rustlers, and their indecision was a source of humor to Ella and Jim.

Finally John Durbin said earnestly, "You two have got to quit the country—right now. An' you know damn well what for. If you don't leave," he added, trying to make a serious threat, "we'll drown you in this river."

Jim Averell spat with contempt.

"If I leave the country I'll damn well be paid for it. I'm a big man myself now—own land and cattle, plenty of both. But if your figure is right, I might take your offer."

Ella Watson was a little unnerved by the business-like attitude of the vigilantes. She laughed hysterically.

"Drown us in that river? Why, there ain't enough water there to give one of you land hogs a decent bath!"

She was right, and her outburst plus Jim's sarcasm was trying to the temper of the Sweetwater men.

A consultation took place between Durbin, Bothwell and Connor.

"All right," said Durbin, "if you won't listen to us there is only one course we can take."

The prisoners were hauled down from the wagon and the party labored over high masses of piled boulder and rock along the stream bed. They reached a cottonwood and two ropes were produced and knotted.

Averell let them place a noose around his neck and took his stand on a lower branch of the cottonwood. He was still cheerful and unmoved, for he did not think the cattlemen would carry through their purpose.

But Ella Watson broke down completely. Sobbing and fighting, she wrestled violently with her captors and fought off the noose with wild, heavy lunges of her body. One moment she shrieked her full vocabulary of epithets at the cattlemen and the next begged them to spare her for the sake of their mothers and sisters. Her nerve, her hard veneer and rough courage were all gone now. And the beauty that had helped make her reputation on the frontier had no effect on these grim ranchmen.

The valley cowmen were still hesitating to push the rustlers out into space when an interruption occurred. A confederate of Jim and Ella's, Frank Buchanan, brought by the young messenger the cowmen had captured and then let go when they took Averell, opened up from across the stream with a six-shooter. Bullets whizzed about and John Durbin fell with a thigh wound. Others hauled out their rifles to meet the unexpected attack.

Buchanan was driven off without much trouble. But in the excitement someone pushed Jim and Ella off their limb.

They did not die quickly or pleasantly. And it wasn't till thirty hours later that residents of Casper came and cut them down. The moccasins of Wyoming's lady rustler had dropped off and lay under the tree where they died.

A Novelet of a Death-bound Trail From Taos

DOOM ON THE TRAIL

By JAMES P. WEBB

The girl from Louisiana had all the heroes of the frontier to choose from. But she picked as her guide into peril country the man who had left her brother in the redskins' path.

MITCH DOOM was tall, spare, and wide-shouldered. He was hard as iron and as tireless as a wolf. His buckskins were stained with smoke and dirt. His dark, pockmarked face seemed to have the same leathery quality as his hunting-shirt, and his gray eyes hinted smoulderingly of an untamed spirit.

Squatting against the back wall, inside the half-dark trappers' cabin, Doom stared at Tim Idleman.

"I've been trappin' and huntin' in these mountains for a long time, Tim," Doom said in a harsh voice, "and I never saw it fail. The red devils 'll be comin' into West Park right away now, lookin' for trappers that didn't have sense enough to get out with their catch soon as the passes open up."

Tim Idleman was nearly as tall as Mitch Doom, and he was dressed much the same; but his face was not as hard as Doom's. nor his muscles as tough. Now his eyes had a sultry gleam.

"You been bossin' me and Bill all winter," Idleman said, "and that's all right. You're supposed to be the leader. We got eight hundred good furs, but they's plenty more we ain't got. I've trapped some myself, and I ain't lookin' for the Utes to bust in here for a month yet."

Mitch Doom's smouldering eyes did not waver; his bleak face did not change expression. He said:

"We got eight hundred furs. That's a good catch. I've worked many a winter for less. I say now's the time to get out."

The third member of their trapping team, young Bill Yelton, leaned against the wall across from Doom. This was only his second winter as a trapper. He said:

"Mitch, we got the furs all cached where the Utes couldn't find 'em if they did come. We could take a chance."

Doom shifted his glance to Yelton's face. He spat.

"We could take a chance," he snapped. "It'd be takin' a chance too. If we stay here another week, we're like to lose our furs and traps, and our hair, too. We've done stayed too long."

Tim Idleman shrugged. "All right, Mitch. Let's get our furs loaded on the hosses and head for Taos, then. But we'll be losin' by doin' it."

Mitch Doom rose. In his belt he had a heavy knife and two single-shot pistols. His rifle leaned against the wall at his side, and he picked the gun up now. He said:

"You boys better be gettin' things ready. We'll take in the rest of the traps tonight, and we'll get the furs out of the cache and packed on the hosses. We'll pull out in the mornin'." He moved toward the door, walking with the mountain man's effortless stride. "I'm goin' up the ridge and take a look around."

Neither of his pards answered, and Doom went outside. His slow glance moved around, studying the surroundings of the cabin. Varying from the Rocky Mountain trapper's usual custom, Doom and his two friends had built a shelter of pine entirely above ground, instead of a dugout.

Doom set off up the slope to the northward, his eyes restless and alert, the rifle slung in the crook of his right arm. His bleak, dark, pitted face wore an unusually grim expression. As he walked, his glance returned again and again to a creek off to his left, marked by its bordering willows and quaking aspens. But nothing held his gaze long.

Doom reached the top of the slope and started along the ridge. He had taken thirty steps when he stopped suddenly. His glance went down the northward slope, which was shaded by a scattered growth of pine.

For twenty seconds, Doom did not move; then he turned and plunged off the crest of the ridge, taking a diagonal course toward the cabin. He went down the slope in long, plunging leaps.

THE cabin door opened and Bill Yelton stepped outside. He saw Doom and halted abruptly. For a moment, the youth stood with his body twisted, one leg bent, his head lifted, as if frozen in that position. Then he turned his head and spoke over a shoulder and Tim Idleman opened the door.

Doom raced on, his rifle swinging in his right hand. He called out in a harsh, long-reaching voice:

"Utes comin'. Get your guns, boys. We'll have to run for it."

Tim Idleman jerked his head out of sight; and Bill Yelton wheeled about and plunged into the cabin. Doom did not slacken speed, and he did not look back.

Tim Idleman and Bill Yelton ran from the cabin. Idleman's glance went up the slope, and he uttered a curse.

"There the devils come, boys," Idleman said, and turned southward away from the cabin at a run.

Bill Yelton was right on Idleman's heels;

but now that his pards were outside and running Mitch Doom's moccasined feet slowed down, and at the corner of the cabin, he stopped and turned.

Doom stared upward at the charging Indians. One of them was well in advance of the others.

Doom lifted his long rifle and took steady aim. The gun cracked sharply, and the leading redskin went down in a long, tumbling fall. Doom turned and ran, reloading his rifle on the run.

Tim Idleman and Bill Yelton slowed down at the sound of Doom's gun. They looked back, holding a jog-trot till Doom overtook them.

"I counted twenty-two of 'em," Doom said, his breathing fast but well controlled. "There ain't but twenty-one of the devils now."

They ran on. They made the top of a hill two hundred yards from the cabin. The Utes were running around the cabin, and one or two entered.

Doom grinned. "They'll have some fun with our traps and what supplies we had left," he said, "but maybe they won't find the furs. We got 'em pretty well cached. Come on, boys."

He turned and ran on. The Indians were leaving the cabin, renewing the chase, their first object being to run the white men down. Then they could return to the cabin.

Mitch Doom swung along in an easy, loping stride. He could have outdistanced either of his pards, but he held his speed down with theirs. The Indians reached the top of the hill and started down, their war-whoop reaching ahead of them.

The white men made for another low hill, reached the top, and then Doom said:

"Let's wait here and give 'em some lead, boys."

The others stopped without question and waited quietly, while the Indians charged nearer. Only the youth, Bill Yelton, showed any sign of nervousness.

Mitch Doom raised his gun. "Pick your man, boys, and don't miss."

Yelton and Idleman put their guns to shoulder, and Doom coolly pointed out to them the Indian each should shoot at. At a word from Doom, the three rifles cracked, and three Indians fell. The remaining redskins did not even pause.

"Come on," Doom said, and they turned and ran, reloading their guns as they went. Doom was grinning, but it was a hard, unpleasant grin. "That leaves just eighteen boys. In a couple days, we ought to have 'em thinned out so we can handle 'em."

Bill Yelton's breath was coming fast. Sweat glistened on his young face. He looked at the mountain man in amazement.

"Couple days?" he echoed. "We can't keep this up a couple days."

Doom's grin faded. "I could," he said. "They ain't got anything but tomahawks, and knives, and arrows. They can't fight till they get pretty close, but they think they can fag us out. We got to keep goin'."

Tim Idleman grunted. "Hell, Mitch."

"What's the matter?"

"Bill can't keep goin' long," Idleman said. "He ain't been on the trail long, y' know. Me, I can keep this up all day, mebbe, but—"

"We'll have to make a stand often, then," Doom said. "If they catch us—"

They made another stand and fired another round. This time, they got only two Indians, and then they reloaded on the run again.

Doom said, "If I hadn't missed that shot, there'd be fifteen of 'em—just five apiece."

Bill Yelton said in a panting voice: "You didn't miss, and you know it. It was my Injun that didn't fall."

"You shot too quick," Tim Idleman said. "You want to take your time when you're shootin' Injuns at that distance, son."

AT midafternoon, they were still running; still stopping at intervals to make a stand, and reloading on the run. Doom estimated that they had covered about twenty miles. The Indians had gained only slightly, and all their gain had been made in the past two hours, when Bill Yelton's pace had begun to slacken.

The youth's face was pale and strained. Doom watched him sidelong as he kept pace with the boy. Tim Idleman was slightly ahead.

Doom said, "There's only eight of the redskins now. If we could hold out a few hours longer. . . ." The tall mountain

man showed no sign of fatigue, after the seven hours of flight. "You pretty tired, Bill?"

Bill answered jerkily, "Can't . . . can't make it, Mitch. You and Tim go ahead. I—"

Mitch Doom growled deep in his throat. "We're stickin' together." He looked back and muttered an oath. The eight Utes were much closer than they had ever been before. The pace of the white men was getting slower and slower. "Let's give 'em another round, boys."

Tim Idleman heard Doom's call, perhaps, but he continued to run. Doom lifted his voice: "Tim, hold on. We'll give 'em a round."

Tim Idleman stopped, with evident reluctance. His pointed face wore a scowl; and he was muttering as he brought up his rifle. Side by side, the three whites took steady aim and fired. The eight redskins faltered; then six of them came on again, their hair-raising warwhoop reaching ahead of them.

The trappers were on a hill top, and now they turned and started down the far slope. Bill Yelton fired.

"Missed again," Yelton mumbled, at Doom's side. "Thought I could shoot better than that."

"You're tired, Bill," Doom said grimly. "But there's only six now." He stared at Tim Idleman's back, and Doom's eyes smouldered. Idleman had raced out ahead of his companions again. "What's your hurry, Tim? You're gettin' ahead of yourself."

Idleman did not answer.

Bill Yelton gasped: "I can't run any further, Mitch. You and Tim go on. I can't. . . ."

"We started out together," Doom snapped. "Me and Tim both knew you was a greenhorn, son. We stick together."

"But I can't go on, and they're gainin' on us," Yelton said. "No use. . . ."

"Either we all get away from the red devils," Doom said sharply, "or we all fight till they're killed off."

"It'll be us that's killed off," Tim Idleman said raspingly. "Bill's right, Mitch. No use for all of us to—"

Doom stared at Idleman's back. "Hell, Tim, we been together all winter. I never knew you show the white feather."

"White feather, hell!" Idleman's voice was high and angry. "It's just sense, Mitch. Ain't no use in all of us gettin' scalped, just 'cause one can't run no further." He swept his left hand forward in a gesture. "Down there's a gully where Bill can get cover and fight it out."

Doom said: "We'll fight it out there, then, if Bill's played out. All of us."

They reached the bottom of the hill, and the washout which Tim Idleman had mentioned lay just ahead. The Utes were already at the top of the hill, and their cries became shriller and fiercer as the redskins started down the slope.

Tim Idleman plunged into the dry wash and scrambled out on the other side. He paused briefly, his dark eyes flicking at Doom's lean pitted face and moving away again. He said quickly:

"I'm goin' on, Mitch. You comin' with me or stayin' with Bill?"

Doom's voice whipped sharply as he jumped down into the gully: "Get down in here, Tim!"

"I'm goin'," Tim Idleman said doggedly, and he turned and ran, his wiry legs moving fast.

Mitch Doom's dark face hardened. He swung his rifle to shoulder and he was facing south, not north toward the Indians. His harsh voice raced out: "Stop, Tim!" But Idleman did not stop, and Doom laid his smouldering glance along the gun barrel, centering Idleman's back in the sights.

Bill Yelton's voice brought Doom wheeling around. The youth was lying on the sloping side of the wash, his rifle leveled over the bank. The six Utes were charging across the flat.

Yelton fired, and one of the Indians dropped. Doom lifted his rifle again, muttered, "I ought to 'a' shot the—," and pulled trigger. Another Indian went down.

"There's only four now, son," Doom said calmly. "Soon's we finish 'em off, we head south and settle with that skunk Idleman. I'm disappointed in Tim." He was reloading swiftly as he talked, and Bill Yelton, busy at the same task, did not seem to be listening.

Doom dropped his rifle as the Indians plunged at the edge of the wash. Bill Yelton turned loose of his own gun and sprang backward, clawing at the knife in his belt. Doom's right hand jerked out

one of his single-shot pistols, and he fired at an Indian who was making a long leap at him with a tomahawk.

The mountain man had to leap aside to keep the dying redskin from falling against him. He dropped the empty pistol and jerked out his knife. He saw the youth stab one of the Indians who was upon him, but the blow did not strike a vital spot, and the two rolled over on the ground together, the Indian trying to use his tomahawk.

The other two Indians leaped at Doom; one had a knife, the other a tomahawk. The tomahawk flashed down, and Doom parried the blow. He drove his knife into the redskin's breast, heaved back to jerk the weapon free, and received a slash on the arm from the knife of the other Indian.

Doom whipped his arm sidewise, slashing at his remaining opponent. A fleeting glimpse showed him Bill Yelton down on his back with the Indian on top of him with a tomahawk. Doom whipped his arm forward in a vicious stabbing blow at his Indian and felt the blade bite flesh. The redskin sagged, and Doom did not wait to retrieve his knife.

Jumping forward, Doom jerked his remaining pistol with his left hand, shoved the muzzle forward and fired. But he was too late, and he cursed savagely even as the pistol cracked.

The tomahawk struck Yelton's head, and the youth went limp. The redskin crumpled on top of him, shot in the temple. Doom, dropping the empty pistol, leaped forward and rolled the Indian off the body of his young pard. Then he straightened slowly and stared with smouldering eyes into the south. Blood streamed down his right arm and dripped off his hand, but he did not seem to notice.

II

SIX days later, Doom walked into Brant's Fort, which was a trading post about a hundred miles northward of Taos. Doom had traveled more than one hundred and fifty miles in those six days, despite the fact that he had buried the body of Bill Yelton near the spot where he fell, and after that had tried to pick up the trail of Tim Idleman.

Joe Brant, the trader, saw the tall, lithe figure of the approaching mountain man and met Doom at the gates. The aging trader did not make the trapper welcome; there was a definite coldness in Brant's stare.

"So you're here?" he said gruffly. "I figured you'd be goin' back after the furs. But I guess you need hosses."

Doom stared. "What's the matter with you, Joe?"

"Nothin' the matter with me," Brant said, "only I wouldn't have expected it of you, Mitch. There ain't much I can say to a man who turns on his own pards, just so he can keep the whole catch for himself."

Doom's lean, pitted face looked as hard as bronze. His lips made a thin slash under his beak of a nose, and his gray eyes smouldered with the fires of suppressed anger. He said softly: "Who are you talkin' about, Joe?"

Joe Brant made a gesture with his right hand. He said gruffly, "Tim Idleman was here. He says you shot that young feller that was with you and shot at Tim, but he got away. That's what he told us."

Mitch Doom did not change expression; but the smouldering gleam in his eyes became more sultry. He voiced a soft oath.

"So Tim told you that, did he?"

Brant nodded. "Said you was walkin' behind 'em, twenty or thirty miles this side o' your trappin' grounds. He says there was some Injuns behind you quite a distance, and you figured you'd tell folks the Injuns killed your pards, only Tim got away."

Doom's voice was still low and calm: "So you don't want me here, Joe?"

Brant said, "If you did that, Mitch, I don't. A white man—"

Doom turned away. "Take your tradin' post and go to hell," he said harshly.

AT NOON of the fourth day, Doom entered Taos. His bleak, pitted face was grim, and when he noticed certain acquaintances avoiding him, his eyes smouldered. He strode into a saloon, where about a dozen men were drinking and talking. Near the far end of the bar, the mountain man spotted Kit Carson, neat in black broadcloth.

The talking ceased abruptly as Doom entered. He paused, stared from one un-

friendly face to another, and then moved forward. His moccasined feet made no sound. He saw that Carson's gaze was steadily upon him, and he strode down the room and stopped in front of the old trapper.

The old frontiersman was middle-sized, quiet-voiced and mild of manner. He said softly:

"Tim Idleman's been talkin' about you, Mitch."

Mitch said: "Where is Tim?"

Carson shrugged. "Gathered up some hosses and pulled out this morning. What happened, Mitch?"

"Redskins jumped us," Doom said. "We had to run for it. Young Yelton fagged out and couldn't go any further, so we made a last stand in a dry-wash. Tim refused to stay with us. I ought to 've shot the skunk, but the Injuns were upon us too soon. If Tim had stayed, I reckon they wouldn't have got Bill."

Carson nodded. "That isn't the story Tim told. He says you shot Yelton yourself, and tried to shoot Tim, too, but he got away."

Doom's eyes smouldered. "He allows we both got scalped, I reckon. I'll bet he's goin' back to gather in the catch and keep it all for himself."

Carson nodded again. "He wanted to explain how he managed to get away, and he hit on the idee of sayin' you shot Yelton and turned on him. I've known Tim for some time, Mitch. Trapped with 'im one season."

Doom went back to the front end of the bar. Ignoring the hostile stares of the other men, he had just stepped up to the bar when a huge mountain man entered.

The huge trapper looked around the room. Then he moved forward, paused behind one of the drinkers and said:

"Mister, I'm Cal Brown. I'm a-lookin' fer Kit Carson. They told me I'd find 'im in here. P'int him out to me, will ye?"

The man at the bar half turned and pointed at Carson.

Cal Brown moved on, his huge moccasins noiseless on the floor. At first Brown moved rapidly, his dark eyes centered on Carson; but as he drew nearer, his steps slowed down, and perplexity wrinkled his low brow. He stopped ten feet from Carson. He scowled.

"Mister," he rumbled, "I ain't a-mindin' a leetle joke. When they say ye're Kit Carson, the man who done all that fightin', I know they're a-havin' their fun. That's all right but I'm in a rush. Now if ye'll jest p'int out the shore-enough Kit Carson, I'll let ye off without no busted bones."

A twinkle appeared in Carson's eyes, and a faint smile touched his lips. He stepped back away from the bar, and his glance ranged along the line of men. He lifted an arm and pointed straight at Mitch Doom.

"There's Kit," Carson said.

A ripple of subdued mirth ran the length of the room, and was quickly choked off as Cal Brown moved toward Doom.

"That's more like," Brown said heartily. "Friend Kit, I want to see ye private."

Mitch Doom opened his lips to deny that he was Carson; then, without knowing exactly why, he changed his mind and said nothing. He followed the huge trapper outside.

"A woman sent me to fetch ye," Brown said. "She's in a wagon out yonder."

Mitch Doom stopped suddenly, scowling. "What woman?"

Brown paused and turned. "I dunno, Kit. I allowed ye'd know who she is. She told me to send ye out to talk to her."

Doom studied the huge trapper's face. "And you don't know who she is?"

"Shore I know, in a way," Brown admitted. "I been guidin' her train. Rest o' the wagons air gone on, but she's stayin' here. Hired me, but I don't know yit what for. Her pa's with her, too."

"Well," Doom said impatiently, "who is she?"

"Her name's Irene Yelton," Brown said. "Her an' her old man's from Louisiana."

THE CONESTOGA wagon stood in the shadow of an adobe wall. Irene Yelton appeared to be about twenty years old. She had thick red-brown hair and level gray eyes. She looked at Mitch Doom with frank appraisal.

Doom removed his hat. "Cal Brown said you wanted to see me," he said.

The girl said, "Yes. I've heard of you, Mr. Carson, and I don't know anybody in this country of course. I want—" She stopped and bit her lip. "My brother,

William, ran away from home and came west. For a while we didn't know where he'd gone. We got a letter, written last fall from Taos, and he said that he was trapping. He said that he was going out to a place he called West Park with two men named Doom and Idleman."

Doom nodded, his face impassive. He knew about that.

"Father and I came out here, hoping that we could find him and take him back home," Irene Yelton went on. She stopped again and bit her lip. A mist of tears blurred her fine eyes. "But now—"

Doom said softly, "You've heard that he's dead?"

She nodded. "We heard. We had barely arrived here when Mr. Idleman came. Father found out who he was and talked to him. He told father about Bill . . . about how that man Doom shot him in the back."

Doom's eyes smouldered, and he said nothing.

"Now we want to go to Bill's grave," Irene Yelton said, her voice unsteady.

"It's a long trip," Doom said. "And dangerous."

She lifted her eyes and looked at him again. Despite her beauty, the frank steadiness of her gaze and the strength of her chin gave her a strong resemblance to her brother Bill.

"We know that, but we wish to undertake it, anyway," she said. "We want you to guide us, along with Mr. Brown."

"It wouldn't be safe for you," Doom said gruffly.

Her eyes flashed. "I'm willing to take that risk. It isn't only that we want to visit my brother's grave. I want that ruthless murderer brought to justice. We want to employ you, Mr. Carson."

For a long moment, Doom's smouldering eyes held her gaze. The lines of his pitted face became harsh and bitter. He said:

"It's a fool trip. You can't go in a wagon. We'd have to ride horseback. You'd have to have some other clothes."

"I can ride," the girl said. "As for the other clothes, I'll get some buckskin garments. Can you find out where Bill's grave is located?"

Mitch Doom, his smouldering gaze never leaving her face, nodded once.

"I can take you right to the place," he said, "if the Injuns don't get you first. But you're a fool to make the trip."

"Bill and I were the only children," she said. Color climbed up into her soft cheeks, but her voice did not falter. "As to whether I'm a fool or not, you may have your opinion, Mr. Carson. Will you guide us?"

And again Mitch Doom nodded.

III

IRENE YELTON and Mitch Doom rode side by side. Behind them came the girl's father, Henry Yelton. He was a thin, pale man, distinctive and dignified with gray mustache and imperial. He seemed out of place on the plains, but Doom had noticed that Yelton handled his weapons as if he were used to them.

Behind Yelton was Cal Brown, mounted on a shaggy mustang. The huge mountain man was managing the two pack horses.

They had been on the trail three days and they had passed within sight of Brant's Fort the preceding day at dusk.

Doom glanced sidewise at the girl. She showed no indication of fatigue, though they had been making fifty miles and more each day. She wore a broad hat over her rich red-brown hair, and she had acquired a fine buckskin riding outfit from a Mexican woman in Taos.

The girl was gazing at the upthrust of mountains to the northwest. Her eyes had a pensive expression, and her full lips were slightly parted.

"This is a lonely land," she said. "It almost seems that it's too lonely to have graves in it."

Mitch Doom said gruffly, "Ain't any land that lonely," and after that they rode in silence for a few minutes.

Then the girl said, "Did you find out where . . . where Bill's grave is?"

Doom nodded. "If we keep on goin', we ought to be there the day after tomorrow, or maybe the day after that." He turned his head and looked at her. "I still don't see why you wanted to make this trip."

Irene bit her lip. Then she said, "I know it must seem foolish to you, Mr. Carson, but—well, Bill and I were very fond of each other and it just seems that

I *must* see where he lies. I couldn't bear never to see his resting place." She paused, and added, "And somewhere out here in the wilds is the fiend who shot him."

Mitch Doom's eyes smouldered.

"And if you find him," he asked, "what then?"

Irene turned her head and looked full at him. "If he is found, you and Mr. Brown are to see that he pays." A certain fierceness shook her voice. "Oh, I could shoot him myself!"

Mitch Doom's grin was wolfish, and the edges of his lips were pulled back to expose his jaw teeth. He said, "What if he ain't guilty? How do you know Bill's even dead?"

"Why—" Her eyes opened wide. "Do you mean he may still be alive?"

"Do you know he ain't?" he countered. "You heard anybody say what happened except Tim Idleman?"

She shook her head. "No, I—"

"Well," Doom said, and his lean face resumed its normal expression, "I'm sorry to say your brother's dead. But Tim Idleman didn't see him die and he don't know it. Tim just sort of guessed."

Irene looked at him, her gray eyes puzzled. "How do you know that, Mr. Carson?"

"I know," Doom said slowly, "your brother was killed by Injuns."

"Do you know Mitch Doom?" she asked.

Doom nodded. "And Tim, too. Mitch Doom never shot a white man in his life."

She rode with her head down, thoughtfully, for several minutes. Doom watched her with a sidelong gaze.

"Now I don't know what to believe," she said. "We've heard so much of you, Mr. Carson. We learned to trust you before we ever saw you. If you say Doom didn't—"

Doom's gaze was ranging ahead and around. He reined his horse to a halt and put a hand to stop Irene's mount. Henry Yelton halted; and behind him big Cal Brown brought his horses to a halt.

Doom said, "Wait here."

He rode ahead, leaving the others standing, and rode up a slope to the crest of a low hill. Shading his eyes with a hand he peered about. Presently he turned in the saddle and motioned with his right arm, and the others rode up to him.

"What was it?" Irene asked, anxiously.

Doom shook his head. "Nothin'. We're in Injun country, though. Have to be careful."

"I ain't seen a sign of any redskins yit," Cal Brown called out from the rear. "Don't believe there's ary red varmint in a hundred mile."

Henry Yelton rode up alongside Doom. He was erect on the saddle, and his eyes, under heavy brows, were keen.

"I don't know anything about fighting Indians, Mr. Carson," he said, "but I'm not at all a poor shot. In the event that we are suddenly attacked by a superior force I'd like to be able to make a good showing."

Doom said dryly, "If we're jumped at all, it'll be by a superior force, all right. Most important thing in fightin' redskins is to keep cool and make your shots count. Reckless shootin' will lose your hair. Best thing is not to shoot till you see you're goin' to have to. Redskins are scared of a loaded gun. Sometimes they try to make you shoot before they're in much danger of gettin' hit, and then they'll close in while you're reloadin'."

Doom glanced at the girl and added, "There's a mighty strong chance we won't see any Injuns. It's a little too early in the spring for many Injuns to be hereabouts. That's why I agreed to fetch you over here. The redskins that killed Bill were a sort of advance party. Young bucks takin' an early start."

Henry Yelton dropped back, leaving Doom and the girl in the lead. She was staring at Doom.

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"Just figured it," he said shortly.

She was thoughtful for the remainder of that day's ride. They went into camp at sunset, and Doom insisted that there be no fire.

"If any of the red devils are lurkin' around," he explained, "they'll be lookin' out for campfires. We better stand guard tonight, too."

The three men took turns at standing guard but nothing happened.

IN THE morning, Doom permitted a fire, and Cal Brown prepared breakfast.

"Friend Kit," he said, "I'm the best cook in the mountains, and the best shot but two, and the strangest man that ever stood in moccasins."

Doom looked at the big man dourly. "Who're the two that can beat you shootin'?"

Cal Brown, crouched beside the fire, looked up and grinned. "From what I've heard, you're one of 'em, Kit. And from what I hear Mitch Doom is the best of all. They tell me Doom can shoot the toenails off a runnin' Injun."

"I doubt it," Doom snapped. He turned on his heel and went out to see about the horses.

The morning was still crisp when they mounted to begin the fourth day's ride.

Doom did not allow much conversation between himself and the girl. He seemed moody and grim, and he made frequent spurts ahead to scout the country they were approaching. He saw no fresh Indian sign, but his vigilance never relaxed. At high noon, he ordered a halt for dinner, and went on again. They covered at least sixty miles before darkness settled over the plains again.

The three men took turns standing guard again. And again none of them saw any sign of Indians.

They were up at daybreak and Cal Brown was busy with the breakfast. At sunrise they were in the saddle.

"Look here!" Cal Brown called, before they had ridden a mile.

Doom halted and turned in the saddle. Brown was pointing a thick finger at the ground.

"Tracks!"

Doom said, "Not Injuns, though. That's the hosses of a white trapper goin' into the mountains to pack out his catch. Come on."

The girl, riding at Doom's side, looked at him curiously. "It's odd how much you can read from tracks," she said. "You are as I thought you'd be except—" She hesitated, then went on—"except in some ways."

"What ways?"

"Well, your looks, perhaps, and—"

Doom made no reply to this. After a moment he said, "We're better than two hundred miles from Taos now. It's nearly seventy to where your brother's buried. We won't travel so hard today, and we'll get there tomorrow." He paused, then added gruffly, "Then we're goin' on another thirty miles to pick up my winter's catch."

Irene frowned. "But I thought you had to have pack horses to carry the furs. How—?"

"I think another fellow'll have 'em loaded by the time we get there."

"You mean," she said, "your partner?"

Doom nodded. "My pardner."

After another silence, Irene said, "I didn't finish what I started to say yesterday, Mr. Carson. I said we'd heard of you and knew that you could be trusted—"

Doom put out a hand in a gesture that stopped her. He said, "If you've heard so much, how come you didn't hear enough to know that Carson's just about quit the trail? How come you thought he'd be as young as I am?"

She turned her head quickly, and her eyes were wide as she stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Doom said sourly, "that I'm not Kit Carson. Cal Brown took it for granted that I was Carson and brought me to you. After that—"

Her gasp was audible, and she leaned a little away from him, both hands clutching the pommel of her saddle. She said, "Then who are you?"

"I'm Mitch Doom."

Irene uttered a little, muted cry and swayed in the saddle. Doom urged his horse close and put out a steadying hand and felt her body shrink from his touch.

Henry Yelton spurred forward; and Cal Brown, seeing that something had gone amiss, lashed the pack horses and drove them forward until the entire little party was in a tight group.

Yelton said quickly, "What's the matter, Irene?"

Doom's eyes were smouldering. "I told her I'm not Kit Carson."

Henry Yelton started. "Not Kit Carson?" He turned on his saddle to stare at Cal Brown. "You said he *was* Kit Carson. What's—?"

Cal Brown loosed a bellow that caused his wiry mustang to snort and prance against the reins.

"Jumpin' catamounts!" he roared. "You mean to say that little squirt in that saloon had the gall to lie to me? Jest wait till I git back to Taos."

Mitch Doom's hard grin exposed his jaw teeth. He said, "Take my advice and leave that little squirt alone. He's Kit Carson."

IV

HENRY YELTON recovered from his amazement. His jaw set firmly, and his eyes blazed as he turned back to face Mitch Doom. The rifle whipped to Yelton's shoulder.

"Mitch Doom! The murderer of my son!"

Doom's dark, grim, pitted face did not change expression, except for the smouldering of his eyes. The hard grin remained on his lips and gave him a strangely harsh and bitter appearance. He said:

"Put that gun down."

Yelton snapped, "I ought to shoot you."

"I didn't kill your son," Doom said.

Irene Yelton stared at Doom with wide eyes. Her face was pale. She spoke quickly, "Wait, Dad! I don't know what to believe. We don't want to make a mistake."

Cal Brown's voice rumbled, "I'd never 'a' believed Mitch Doom would shoot a pard in the back. I don't think they's any reason why you have to believe Tim Idleman."

Yelton kept his gun leveled. "I don't know any reason why we should believe Doom, either. One thing's certain, we can't afford to trust him now. I'm not going to shoot you, Doom, but I'll give you three minutes to get started. Head south and stay out of my sight from now on."

Doom's grin faded at last, and the smouldering light in his eyes brightened. He looked as wild and dangerous and unpredictable as a battle-scarred wolf. His voice took on a raspy harshness which matched his appearance.

"Cal, you'll find the grave on this side of a dry-wash straight ahead. It's seventy miles. Maybe you can find it."

Without further speech, he reined his horse aside.

Cal Brown said, "You'll need some grub, Mitch."

"I'll get my grub," Doom said, and turned southward. He rode without looking back, erect in the saddle, the smoke-darkened buckskins molding his muscular frame.

A MILE to the south Doom's horse dropped swiftly into a shallow ravine which slanted toward the northwest. Doom turned and followed it. He had started with this expedition, and it was not in the nature of the man to desert it, even under threat. The fact that he had been dismissed by Henry Yelton made little difference. The Yeltons were far from civilization, and there was increasing danger of their running into a small raiding party of Indians.

Doom had considerable faith in the ability of Cal Brown to guide the Yeltons and to scent danger, but he did not feel that he had been relieved from his own responsibility. The Yeltons were new to the Indian country, and their avowal that they did not want Doom along made no difference in the attitude of the mountain man.

And Mitch Doom had business of his own in the West Park, and there was little time to lose.

At intervals during the day, Doom sighted the Yeltons. He noted that Henry Yelton was handling the pack animals now, and Cal Brown was scouting ahead.

Toward sunset, Doom put his horse to a run and passed Brown and the Yeltons. He picketed his horse in a grassy swale, took his rifle from the saddle-sheath and stole up the slope. He watched Cal Brown go into camp.

Back at his own dry camp, Doom chewed on some jerked meat he had carried in his saddlebag. After moonrise, he mounted again and rode on.

About three miles northward, at the mouth of a ravine which opened out into a grassy basin, Doom drew rein and stared at the glow of a campfire some distance ahead. The moonlight was so bright that the mountain man could not approach the camp without being seen, but he guessed that this was a party of Indians. The fact that they had only one campfire indicated that it was a small party.

Retreating some distance, Doom picketed his horse and risked taking a few hours' sleep. He was a light sleeper, and

when alone he did not fear a surprise attack; and it was not likely that the redskins would move from their camp before dawn.

WELL before daylight, Doom was at the mouth of the ravine again, and he stayed there long enough to watch the Indian encampment come to life. A breakfast fire glowed in the fading darkness.

By the time the Indians were finished with breakfast, the mountain man was able to count them in the gray light. So far as he could see, there were only six of them. He decided that they might have been members of the same raiding party which had attacked himself and his two pards several days before.

On the other hand, the six redskins might be merely a scouting party from a really formidable band of warriors.

Doom retreated cautiously to the place where he had left his horse. The Indians, armed with bows and arrows and knives and tomahawks, were heading out of the basin directly toward the mouth of the ravine. These men were mounted, and Doom thought that the horses they rode were six of the pack animals which Doom, Yelton and Idleman had had in West Park. If this were so, these Indians had passed the cabin and raided the place; but probably they had passed before the arrival of Tim Idleman and the new pack train.

Doom rode below the crest of a ridge, occasionally moving up to peer down at the Indians. The redskins were moving southward, and they seemed in no hurry. They were following a route which might bring them face to face with the Yeltons and Cal Brown at any moment.

The Yeltons were just breaking camp when the six Indians came over the brow of the hill to the northward and sighted them. Instantly, they raised a blood-chilling warwhoop and charged, urging the bony pack animals they rode into a run.

Doom saw Cal Brown swing from his saddle, draw the horses close together and grasp the reins of all three mounts in one big hand. Brown held his rifle in his right hand.

Henry Yelton and his daughter, evidently obeying a sharp order from Brown, dismounted quickly. Both Yelton and the girl leveled their rifles at the oncoming redskins. Mitch Doom, watching anxiously, frowned.

The six Indians, riding as fast as the horses would run, split into two groups. Three went to the left and three to the right and they passed the Yeltons at long range. Yelton and Irene turned to keep them covered with the rifles, but they did not fire.

Mitch Doom smiled. The redskins were trying to work a common Indian trick of drawing the fire of the whites too soon; after which, they could race in at close range while the guns were being reloaded, and finish their enemies off with arrows and knives. But Brown was restraining his companions, and that was well.

The Indians, a hundred yards or more beyond the Yeltons, stopped and turned and rode back, their warwhoops splitting the air. They charged straight at the whites as if they meant to run them down. They drew their bowstrings threateningly, as if about to let the arrows fly. Again Henry Yelton and Irene pointed their guns.

As before, the Indians swerved aside without slackening speed; three rode to the left and three to the right and they surged past without drawing a shot from the whites.

The redskins came together in a group again and faced around toward the whites.

Mitch Doom urged his horse down the slope. He was eastward of the Indians, and he came in from the side while they were getting ready to charge again. The mountain man knew that when the game of bluff was finished, the whites might succeed in killing three of the Indians, if Yelton and the girl could shoot straight, but that would still leave three redskins, and their arrows would take effect. It was time to finish the thing one way or another.

Mitch Doom voiced a long-running yell, and his horse surged down the slope at breakneck speed.

THE six Indians were charging again, and this one-man flank attack disconcerted them for a moment. Brown, Yelton and Irene fired a crashing volley of shots, and two of the redskins rolled from their running mounts. Mitch Doom, without

slackening speed, raised his rifle and killed another.

Arrows zipped through the air as the three remaining Indians charged on. One of them, riding loosely and facing sidewise, loosed a shaft at Doom as the lean mountain man plunged within easy range.

Doom's two pistols were out. He saw a hard-driven arrow plunge into Cal Brown's chest, and Doom cursed savagely as the big mountain man sagged and dropped to his knees. Doom fired his right-hand pistol, dropped it and shifted the remaining pistol to his right hand as the fourth Indian plunged off his horse.

An arrow grazed Doom's buckskin sleeve, and the two redskins swung their mounts to face him. Another bow was drawn when Doom's second pistol cracked and sent the red bowman tumbling to the ground.

Henry Yelton sprang at the remaining Indian with rifle clubbed, just as the redskin flung his tomahawk at Doom. Yelton's rifle swung around hard, and the stock swept the Indian off the horse.

The flying tomahawk, which seemed almost to have been thrown by a dead man, hit the side of Doom's dodging head a flatwise, glancing blow, and the mountain man reeled in the saddle, dropping his empty pistol. The lunging horse seemed to run from under him, and he fell sprawling.

Instantly, it seemed, Irene Yelton was kneeling beside him, and the sound of her sobs reached through the darkness of the mountain man's semiconsciousness.

Irene uttered a low cry when she saw that he was alive.

"I just know," she said, "that you wouldn't have shot Bill that way."

Doom sat up, a little groggily, and his eyes shifted toward the huddled body of Cal Brown. Doom heard Henry Yelton say:

"You didn't have to come to our aid, Doom. It seems to me that a man who would betray his partners wouldn't have come to help us. I think Irene's right."

Doom's cheek was streaked with blood, but the smouldering gleam was back in his eyes. He got to his feet; and, staggering a little, he walked over to look down at the huge body of Cal Brown.

Brown was dead.

"Nothin' to do but bury him," Doom said, his voice hoarse. He looked at Henry Yelton. "You'd make a right good Injun fighter, Yelton. But you ought to learn to use a knife in close quarters."

Irene Yelton, staring wide-eyed at the Indian her father had killed with the rifle stock, shuddered violently.

DOOM and Yelton buried the body of Cal Brown, but they left the Indians where they had fallen. Irene Yelton, who had recovered some of her composure, protested against this, but Doom only looked at her with faintly smouldering eyes and offered no explanation.

The party caught up their scattered horses, mounted and went on, traveling as they had traveled the preceding day, except that now Mitch Doom instead of Cal Brown was the leader. Doom missed Cal, and sometimes when he glanced back he was almost surprised for an instant to see Henry Yelton handling the pack horses and the huge buckskin-clad mountain man not there.

Irene was not in the mood for talk today; she rode in silence just ahead of her father and the pack animals. Mitch Doom, also dour and silent, scouted ahead, keeping a sharp eye peeled for Indian sign. He still was not convinced that the party of six redskins were not merely scouting for a large band which had made its way into the vicinity of West Park at the very onset of spring. But he saw no Indians that morning.

Shortly before noon, Mitch Doom rode to the top of a low hill and looked down the slope toward the dry-wash where he and Bill Yelton had stopped to fight the Indians. The tall trapper held his horse quiet until the Yeltons had come up beside him.

Doom lifted an arm, pointing at a low mound which was topped by heavy rocks. "There's the grave down there, about twenty feet from the dry-wash."

His smouldering eyes were not looking in the exact direction indicated by his pointing arm. Instead, his gaze was lifted far beyond and to the left. A cavalcade of animals, dwarfed by distance, were just now topping the rise beyond the gully. Doom knew that it was a string of pack horses—loaded with eight hundred prime

beaver pelts—and that Tim Idleman would be with the pack train.

A rider in a big hat was leading the train, and Doom, who had made a few inquiries in Taos, knew that this would be Juan, a young Mexican whom Idleman had employed to assist him.

Doom said "You folks ride on down there. I'll be along pretty soon." He dropped back a few paces and waited.

The Yeltons rode down the slope. Doom peered over the hill top and saw the pack train coming along steadily. He waited a little longer, his beak-nosed, pitted face and smouldering eyes as grim and savage as the wilderness he inhabited.

IRENE YELTON was kneeling on the ground beside the mound of earth and stones which protected her brother's body from the coyotes. Henry Yelton, erect in the saddle, stared into the distance.

The Mexican found a shallow place in the banks of the dry-wash and led his train across. Behind the last animal rode Tim Idleman, his pointed face and sullen eyes showing curiosity as he watched the man and the girl beside the new grave. He gestured with an arm to the Mexican, and Juan brought the pack train to a halt. Juan tilted his hat against the noon sun and hipped over in the saddle to rest his muscles while he prepared and lighted a quirly.

Tim Idleman rode over to the grave of Bill Yelton. He looked down at the kneeling girl and remained silent until she saw him and stood up. Henry Yelton still stared into the distance, sitting as erect as a cavalryman.

The girl stared at Idleman with distaste. She said, "Did you think the Indians killed Mr. Doom?"

Tim Idleman's eyes narrowed. He said, uneasily: "I thought likely, but when I came along here night afore last, I didn't see nothin' of his remains—nor more 'n one grave."

The girl's voice was strong with sudden conviction: "Mr. Doom escaped. He and Bill killed all the Indians, and Mr. Doom buried . . . my brother. He says if you had stayed with them, my brother probably wouldn't have been killed."

Tim Idleman's face darkened, and he muttered an oath. "What're you talkin' about? You tryin' to make out I run off from. . . ."

The trapper's glance shifted and ran along the southward hill, and his voice died.

Mitch Doom was riding down the hill. The mountain man with the pitted face was not urging his horse. The animal came on at a moderate gait, and Doom held his rifle across the pommel of his saddle.

Idleman's mouth sagged open, and his pointed face was suddenly pale. He reined his horse around in a tight turn, and went past the lounging Mexican at a gallop, his lean body bent low in the saddle.

Mitch Doom did not increase the speed of his horse. He balanced the rifle across the saddle in front of him and cupped both hands around his mouth. His voice reached out, harsh and grim and far-running:

"Tim! Wait! I want to see you."

Idleman, already far out along the rim of the dry-wash, swung his horse gradually southward. He did not answer nor heed Doom's shout.

Doom yelled: "Might as well wait now, Tim. I'm comin' after you."

Doom guided his horse toward the Mexican, who was still lounging in the saddle and smoking his quirly imperturbably, while his dark eyes watched the fast-fading form of Tim Idleman.

"Juan," Doom said, "these are my furs—mine and Yelton's yonder—and we want you to take the train on to Taos for us."

Juan turned his head to look at Doom, and there was a glint in the Mexican's dark eyes. He said softly:

"*Señor* Tim theenk you dead, *Señor* Mitch. I theenk you scare heem."

ON THE return trip, Juan rode ahead of the pack train, to which had been added the two horses belonging to Henry Yelton. Yelton volunteered to follow behind the train. Doom and the girl rode side by side, and the mountain man kept a sharp watch for redskins until they had reached a point a few miles north of Brant's fort, after which his vigilance relaxed somewhat.

They were following a course which would take them past Brant's Fort at a

distance of about a mile. Doom did not show any inclination to pause there, but before they had ridden past the fort, Juan saw a rider galloping out of the open gate. The Mexican notified Doom, and the entire party stopped and waited.

The rider was old Joe Brant himself. He was bareheaded, and his whitening hair whipped in the wind as he came on. The trader reined up a few feet from Doom and Irene.

"Howdy, Mitch," the trader said cordially. "Want to sell them furs?"

Doom's eyes smouldered. "Not to you," he said.

Joe Brant said cheerfully, "You needn't blame me, Mitch. I just knew what I was told. Tim Idleman passed here last night, and he stopped long enough to say he was mistaken about what happened to young Yelton. Tim says now that the red devils got Yelton, and that you weren't noways to blame for it."

Doom said, "Where's Tim now?"

Brant glanced southward. "I reckon he was headin' for Taos, Mitch. He claims he's sold his part of the catch to you. I'd like to buy 'em."

"I've got a sale for 'em in Taos," Doom said, "and when a man thinks I'd shoot a pard in the back. . . ."

Brant did not argue the matter further. As soon as the pack train was on the move again, Irene said, "You're vindictive, I'm afraid."

Doom looked at her with smouldering eyes, and the nostrils of his beaklike nose flared a little. "I don't know what that word means," he said. "Not for sure. But when a man who's known me as long as Joe Brant has. . . ."

"But why hold a grudge?" The girl was watching him anxiously. "Anybody can make a mistake."

Doom said harshly, "I ain't holdin' anything against you and your father. You didn't know me. Anyhow, you'll be goin' back to Louisiana right away, but I got to learn Joe Brant a little lesson. He's goin' to stay in this country."

Irene Yelton smiled faintly and gave him a sidelong glance. "Are you glad that I'll be going back to Louisiana?"

"Yes," Doom snapped.

The girl bit her red lower lip and stared straight ahead.

THE third day after leaving Brant's Fort, the pack train entered Taos at sunset. Doom called out to the Mexican:

"Take 'em to Tom Fanton, Juan. He'll know."

Juan nodded and went on with the pack train. Doom and the Yeltons sat their saddles a moment in silence. Then Henry Yelton said:

"This is a big country, Mr. Doom. I'm glad we were able to see my son's grave, and. . . ." He held out his right hand.

Doom shook hands, then offered his hand to the girl. "I'll have to be goin' now," he said. "I've got somethin' to do."

The girl stared at him. "What?"

"I'm lookin' for Tim Idleman," Doom said in a harsh voice. "No pard of mine can leave me in a tight and then try to. . . ."

Irene said quickly, "You're not going to kill him?"

Doom was breathing hard; his nostrils flared. He looked at the girl with smouldering fires in his gray eyes.

"There ain't room for both of us in this country," he said, and his voice was almost a snarl. "Good-bye."

Henry Yelton looked keenly at his daughter. He said, "A man must live by the rules, I suppose. Come on, Irene. After a night's rest, we'll be starting back to Louisiana in the morning. Thank you, Mr. Doom. I'm sorry about Mr. Brown. And I hope you will forgive us, some time at least, for doubting your integrity."

"But you haven't paid him, Father," Irene said, keeping her gaze away from the tall mountain man.

"I wasn't workin' for you," Doom said harshly. "I was goin' after my furs. Half of the furs are yours." He looked directly at Henry Yelton in the fading light. "I'll meet you at Tom Fanton's early in the mornin' and settle up. We're sellin' the catch to Tom."

Doom waited where he was until Yelton and Irene were gone. Then he rode to the saloon in which he had met Cal Brown. Looking in, he saw that Tim Idleman was not there.

Doom stepped inside, and the four men at the bar looked at him and ceased talking. Doom's eyes were smouldering.

He asked softly: "Seen Tim Idleman?"

There was a long-drawn silence; then

one of the men said: "He was here, Mitch. Seemed in a rush, kind of. Told us he had made a mistake about what happened to Bill Yelton out yonder. He allows now the redskins got him."

Doom nodded and went outside. His rifle was in the sheath on his saddle. He paused in the deepening gloom, drew one of his single-shot pistols and examined it. Pushing the weapon back into the holster, he stepped outside—and almost bumped into Kit Carson.

"Howdy, Mitch," the old frontiersman greeted. "When is the weddin'?"

"What weddin'?"

Carson chuckled. "Yours, Mitch. The Yelton girl."

Mitch Doom growled in his throat. "A Rocky Mountain grizzly couldn't live with me, Kit. Seen Tim Idleman today?"

Carson peered intently at Doom's face. "A minute ago. In Manuel's cantina."

MANUEL'S cantina was on the opposite side of the street, and without another word Doom crossed over. It was a small place, patronized mainly by the Mexicans who still comprised the major portion of the pueblo's population. There was a short counter in the barroom, with bottles of *tequila* and other fiery liquors ranked on the back bar. There were three tables, with chairs. Except for Tim Idleman, and Manuel himself, the place was empty.

Idleman was in the act of lifting a glass to his lips when he saw Doom in the entrance. Turning quickly, Idleman dropped the glass, which shattered on the bar. He stared at Doom, his lean body in a recoiling but motionless position, his left hand braced on the counter.

"Mitch," he said hoarsely, "I told 'em how it happened—and you can have the furs."

With both his single-shot pistols still holstered, Doom moved slowly forward. His dark face was grim and harsh, and his steady eyes blazed, but he said no word.

Idleman put out a hand as if to push something away from him. The hand was shaking. "Wait, Mitch! I fixed it up."

Mitch Doom moved on.

Idleman, still backing slowly along the bar, put his hands behind his back and unfastened the belt which circled the waist of his hunting shirt. The belt, holding his knife-sheath and pistol, fell to the floor.

Idleman said, as if to reassure himself: "You wouldn't shoot a man that can't shoot back."

Doom's lips drew back exposing his jaw teeth. He drew both his pistols and the heavy knife and laid the weapons on the bar; and moved on without pause.

Idleman circled.

Manuel leaned across the bar and picked up Doom's two pistols and the knife. The Mexican seemed to sense Idleman's purpose.

Idleman, his sharp, pinched face contorted with a strange mingling of rage, fear and triumph, made a sudden backward lunge and clawed for Doom's weapons, which were no longer on the counter. Doom lunged with all the ferocity of a mad wolf.

IDLEMAN, finding out too late that his treachery had failed, tried to dodge away. Doom's fist nailed him on the jaw and flung him against the counter. Before Idleman could recover, Doom planted two more solid blows which seemed to keep the traitorous mountain man pinned to the bar. Idleman sagged, and his eyes glazed. A thin stream of blood ran from a corner of his mouth.

Doom's left hand grasped the front of Idleman's shirt and jerked him forward. The dark-faced trapper's strong right hand fastened on Idleman's throat and squeezed with the slow, inexorable pressure of a closing vise. Idleman's face became suffused with blood, and his tongue protruded from his open mouth. His eyes seemed ready to burst from their sockets.

A hand fell upon Doom's shoulder, and Kit Carson said sharply: "You've never killed a white man, Mitch."

Slowly, Doom's fingers loosened their grip. He watched the purple hue fade from Idleman's cheeks; and suddenly Doom jerked hard with his left hand and flung his enemy sprawling to the floor.

Idleman, watching his former partner fearfully, scrambled shakily to his feet. He sidled toward the door, and by the time he reached it, he was running.

Beside Doom, Kit Carson chuckled.

REARGUARD ACTION

By FAIRFAX DOWNEY

A Frontier History Feature

Said Thunder-Rolling-Over-the-Mountain, "The Great Spirit puts it into the heart and head of man to know how to defend himself." . . . Here is the unforgettable story of Joseph and his tribe.

THE United States Army and the Nez Percés had met early and in friendship. The Pierced Noses, as French traders dubbed them, had hospitably received the Army explorers, Captain Meriwether Lewis and Lieutenant William Clark, and later Major John C. Frémont. These tribesmen proudly declared that they had never killed a white man nor broken a promise, a record which could by no means be claimed by the whites.

From time to time, the Nez Percés had peacefully ceded portions of their broad lands in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. Their title in the remainder had been confirmed by treaty.. Then the Government, prompted by gold-hunters and settlers, abrogated that pact and offered a new one demanding more territory. It was signed by all but the southern Nez Percés who refused to be ousted from their home in the Wallowa Valley in the northeastern corner of Oregon. The last charge of their old chief to his son had been: "A few years more, and white men will be all around you. They have their eyes on this land. My son, never forget my dying words. This country holds your father's body. Never sell the bones of your father and your mother."

Succeeding to the chieftainship, Thunder-Rolling-Over-the-Mountain, known as Joseph by the whites, vainly exerted every peaceful means to maintain his people's rights. Because he foresaw the inevitable result of resistance, he was about to yield reluctantly and go on a reservation when his hand was forced. Young braves, who had had a father or brother killed by settlers, went whooping on a raid and massacred a score or more white men, women, and children. When they rode back to camp, waving reeking scalps, Joseph knew that the die was cast. Grimly he promised his tribe that he would give them a bellyful of fighting.

Still nobody thought that the Nez Percés actually would take the warpath. They had dwelled long in peace and waxed prosperous. Yet these red men had not grown soft. Not only did they possess the fine physiques, bravery, and horsemanship so

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common in their race, but they would prove capable of fighting as disciplined troops. The Army would discover to its dismay that Joseph had even taught his warriors infantry and cavalry maneuvers. The Nez Percés were well-armed and, unlike most Indians, excellent shots. And as neither they nor any one else could yet suspect, they were blessed with a magnificent leader.

Joseph, now about thirty-seven, had never been in a battle. He was tall and of commanding presence. The mouth and chin of his strong face resembled Napoleon's. So did his military genius. This red general in less than eleven weeks would conduct a valiant retreat of his tribe for more than sixteen hundred miles, engaging ten separate commands of the United States Army in thirteen battles and skirmishes and fighting them to a standstill.

This epic rearguard action has been justly compared to the march of Xenophon and his ten thousand Greeks. It has been aptly entitled: "U. S. vs. Joseph."

FOUR officers with ninety troopers of the First Cavalry, shortly joined by eleven citizen volunteers, were dispatched from Fort Lapwai, Idaho, to punish the raiders and round up the tribe. They marched seventy miles in two days and on the night of June 17, 1877, camped near White Bird Canyon. Before dawn they mounted up and rode down into the gorge.

In the distance sounded what seemed to be the eerie wail of a coyote, in realty one of Joseph's scouts signalling that the death-trap could now be sprung.

Joseph had sent his women and children and his herds of ponies, sheep, and goats down the Salmon River into hiding behind bluffs. One hundred warriors he had placed in ambush on the right side of the canyon, one hundred on the left.

Behind an advance guard under Lieutenant Edward R. Theller, Twenty-first Infantry, followed Captain Joel G. Trimble and his troop; then Captain David Perry, commanding, and Lieutenant William R. Parnell with the rest of the column. They trotted on through the broadening canyon. Suddenly spurted flashes of flame, and that gloomy place reverberated to the shots of charging Nez Percé horsemen. Theller deployed and held them in check, while Perry came galloping up.

But Joseph, extending his lines, sent warriors flooding in on the flanks and turned the left by sweeping the volunteers from a butte. Sergeant Michael McCarthy, holding the right, was isolated with six troopers. Trimble rallied, charged and brought them off a little way, but soon the whole blue line went reeling back, and again McCarthy and his men were cut off.

This time Parnell and a platoon smashed through to the isolated group and gave them a chance to mount up. But as they galloped off, Nez Percé bullets swept two of the rescued troopers lifeless out of their saddles. McCarthy had one horse shot under him, then a second. Too far behind to catch a third, he crawled into the underbrush and hid beside the body of a dead comrade. From his concealment he saw several squaws suddenly appear on a search for plunder. His boots protruded from the thicket in plain sight, and he dared not move. Stealthily he wiggled his legs out of the boots and pulled them back under cover. The squaws picked up the boots and went on.

Meanwhile the retreat of Perry's shattered column had degenerated into a rout. Lieutenant Theller and eighteen troopers were driven into a cul-de-sac and died to a man under the Nez Percé guns. Clear of the canyon, survivors of the command, whose casualties were forty per cent, managed to stand off pursuit. The triumphant Joseph rode back to camp to learn that during the battle his wife had borne him a son.

Meanwhile the Department Commander, General O. O. Howard, had been concentrating troops against a possible contingency. Howard, who had lost his right arm at the Battle of Fair Oaks in the Civil War, had not been altogether successful as a commander in that conflict nor in subsequent administrative positions. But now his forethought and the promptness with which he took the field spoke well for him.

Howard's force, consisting of parts of the Twenty-first Infantry, First Cavalry, and Fourth Artillery with a howitzer and two Gatlings—two hundred and twenty-seven men—marched to the Salmon River to find Joseph in a splendid position in the mountains on the other side. To get at him Howard had to cross, leaving the river at his back and his line of communications exposed not only to attack by Joseph, crossing at some other point, but also to an onset by a roving band of Nez Percés under the subchief, Looking Glass. Howard, his admiration for the red general's strategy mingled with apprehensions, left Captain Stephen G. Whipple with two troops of cavalry and a Gatling gun to watch Looking Glass, and moved the rest of his command across the river. Through pouring rain they toiled up slopes so slippery that several pack mules lost their footing and rolled down the mountain, gathering terrific momentum, to destruction at the bottom. When the column reached the summit, Joseph was gone.

Meanwhile Whipple had found and struck Looking Glass, capturing six hundred ponies but proving unable to prevent the Indians' escape. Shortly he was himself desperately besieged at Cottonwood Ranch by Joseph who, as feared, had crossed the Salmon and wiped out a scouting party of a lieutenant, a sergeant, and nine troopers. None too soon, Howard got back over the river and relieved his beleaguered subordinate.

It began to dawn on the Army that it was up against something unusual in Indian generalship. Troops had been singing a refrain based on the spiritual, *Turn Back Pharaoh's Army*. Now apparently General Howard was being cast in the role of Pharaoh, and the Nez Percés as the Children of Israel. They, their flocks and their herds, were led by their red Moses over

rivers without supernatural division of the waters. Howard, pursuing, found Joseph, united with Looking Glass and now two hundred and fifty warriors strong, entrenched by the south fork of the Clearwater River.

On July 11, 1877, battle was joined, a fierce conflict more than once hand-to-hand. The Nez Percés shot like expert riflemen. Many soldiers were hit until they dug in with their trowel bayonets. Then they were pinned down behind their breastworks by the Indian fire. An instant's exposure could be fatal. A soldier who lifted his head took a bullet through the brain. Another tilting back his canteen to drink its last drops of water—the Indians held the only spring—felt whistling lead cut off the canteen's neck at his lips. One officer who held up his hand was shot through the wrist, and another, who jumped to his feet for a second, dropped with a neat hole drilled through his chest.

Joseph seemed to be everywhere. His shouts of command could be heard, now in one part of the line, now in another. Several times horses were shot under him, but he was untouched. One of the charges he launched outflanked his adversaries and almost took the pack train which was saved only by arrival of reinforcements. Another galloping onslaught was a veritable red Charge of the Light Brigade except that it was eminently successful. Joseph not only drove through to his enemy's artillery but captured it and rolled the guns back toward his own lines. They stood, abandoned and useless, in no man's land.

That night war drums boomed in triumph in the Indian camp, and the scalp chant's terrifying *hum-hum-hum* rose in its crescendo to wild, whooping climax. At daybreak the fusillade resumed, and the Indians crept closer. But now occurred a supremely gallant episode which would prove the turning point of the battle. Lieutenant C. F. Humphrey, Fourth Artillery, led eleven men in a dash into the enemy's lines to recapture the artillery. Three soldiers were killed, two seriously wounded, and the lieutenant and one other slightly wounded. But back raced the heroic party, bringing off the guns and the dead and disabled.

Howitzer shells and a stream of lead from the Gatlings forced the Nez Percés back into their trenches. Cavalry commanded by Captain Marcus P. Miller charged the Indians' left. They turned it and rode cheering in on the rear. Under such a blow many a foe would have broken in wild panic. Not so Joseph. He countercharged and checked the Blue horse while his riflemen held off Howard until he could retreat across the river to a formidable new position. There he again entrenched.

The Indian loss was heavier than that of the Army, but the Battle of the Clearwater had been a near thing. Joseph had been forced to withdraw but had done so in good order. His line of retreat to the safety of British Columbia was still open.

GENERAL HOWARD sent back his wounded and pushed doggedly on. Joseph delayed him, first by a parley which came to nothing, then by skirmishing. He then resumed his retreat through the fertile Kamai Valley where the peaceful northern Nez Percés were settled. They neither joined nor attempted to hinder him, though a few later served the pursuers as scouts. Joseph now urged his faithful band on to the Lolo Trail through the Bitter Root Mountains. Blocked often by huge boulders and fallen trees and cut by deep ravines, it was, as General Sherman once declared, "one of the worst trails for man or beast on this continent." Over it hastened the warriors, women and children, the aged, the driven herds. Many a pony was ridden to death, but there was no dearth of remounts. And the fugitives drew away from the troops, keeping from two to three days ahead.

Fast as the Nez Percés travelled, there was something far swifter: the invention of a portrait painter named Morse—the telegraph. Over the wires, now become a potent factor in this campaign, clicked orders for the interception of the hostiles as they approached the other end of the pass. Captain C. C. Rawn with fifty Regulars and a hundred citizen volunteers was waiting behind fortifications when Joseph began to descend toward the valley.

Joseph demanded free passage, promising to harm no one as he went. Rawn of course refused. While a fierce fire was opened on the fort, the bulk of the Nez Percés slipped around it through unknown trails and streamed on through the valley.

Settlers, finding they were not to be raided, not only refrained from giving the soldiers any aid but profited handsomely by selling the Indians supplies, including rifles and ammunition! Only one storekeeper refused. He banged the door in red faces, and whether through admiration for his courage and decency or because Joseph had spoken against molestation, the hostiles left him unscathed.

On they pressed through the Rockies and camped in the Big Hole Basin of Montana. The weary tribe rested, believing themselves safe for a few days since Howard was far behind. But the Whispering Wires had been busy again. On telegraphic orders, Colonel John Gibbon came fast from Helena, Montana, with six companies of his Seventh Infantry in wagons, a howitzer, and volunteers—about two hundred men. On August 8, 1877, his scouts sighted the Indian camp. The unsuspecting Joseph had posted no sentries. An attack at dawn the next morning caught him completely by surprise.

Gibbon, who moved his men up close with the stealth of an Indian stalker, assaulted the village on three sides. Women screamed in the bullet-riddled tepees. Naked warriors burst out, rifles in hand. Soldiers fired at such close range that blazing muzzles powder-burned red chests. Wreathed in the blue smoke of battle, maddened men cursed and clubbed guns, battering skulls. A fighting Irishman, William Logan, who had enlisted as a private in the Civil War and now was a captain, stood face to face with an Indian chief, the two of them blazing away with their revolvers. As the chief fell, his sister wrenched the smoking weapon from his hand and shot the officer through the head.

The village was Gibbon's in twenty minutes. Under so disastrous a blow, other tribesmen might have fled. The Nez Percés were sterner stuff. Joseph rallied them in the thickets by the river. His sharpshooters watched for insignia of rank and picked off officers and non-coms, outlined against the burning lodges. Charge after charge was hurled against the Blue battalions. Red men and white fired point-blank into each other's bodies.

It was no question of victory now but of life and death. Gibbon, his losses heavy, sent a galloper up the valley to bring on Howard and retired from the village to a knoll. There two lines, back-to-back, dug in and held off the foe with a steady, accurate fire. All day the battle raged, and not until late that night did the firing die down.

During that afternoon the wagon train and a piece of artillery had moved up to within five miles of the scene of combat, formed park and fortified. At daylight three non-commissioned officers and three men limbered up the howitzer and, led by a scout, started to join Gibbon. As they were going into position on a bluff half a mile from the village, the alert Joseph spotted them. Thirty Nez Percé horsemen, bent low over their ponies' necks, raced toward the gun. Before the terrifying spectacle of an Indian charge, the nerve of two of the cannoneers broke and they ran.

The rest of the gun crew stood by their piece in the best tradition of the artillery. They got off two rounds before the red riders closed in on them firing. Capture certain now, the crew put the howitzer temporarily out of action by throwing the barrel off its trunnions. As they retreated, Corporal Sayles was killed and Sergeants Daily and Fredericks wounded.

The warriors who had captured the howitzer further disabled it by taking off the wheels and hiding them. Had Joseph been able to teach his tribesmen to man a gun as well as he had trained them in infantry and cavalry tactics, the Battle of the Big Hole might have ended then and there. A storm of shells bursting unexpectedly in the trenches on the knoll must have cleared the way for another furious Nez Percé charge which even the valiant defenders could hardly have withstood. But artillery is a technical arm which requires special training. The howitzer's captors could do no more than disable it, a severe enough blow to the Blue. And the redskins' exploit netted them a welcome bonus: two thousand rounds of rifle ammunition on pack mules which had accompanied the gun team.

After the loss of the artillery, Gibbon's situation on the knoll grew more critical. Food gave out, and the command was reduced to cutting chunks from a dead horse and eating them raw since they dared not light a fire. That ration had to serve until a splendid dash, led by Sergeant Mildon K. Wilson, brought through the wagon train. All day long the deadly fire of the Nez

Percé snipers never ceased. Every rifle in the blue line was needed to reply to them, and then there were not enough. All the officers from the commander down picked up guns of dead or wounded men and joined the firing line. Finally a red sharpshooter got his sights on Colonel Gibbon and squeezed his trigger. The bearded Civil War veteran, hit in the thigh, had himself propped up against a tree and continued coolly to direct the defense.

Pick off the enemy's officers. Silence his artillery. Joseph's superb savage generalship employed the best tactics of "civilized" warfare. And now he even staged the 1877 equivalent of a gas attack. With the wind blowing strongly toward the knoll, he ordered his warriors to fire the dry prairie grass. Clouds of smoke, blinding and suffocating, rolled on to the troops in the trenches. For a few desperate minutes, with the Nez Percés mustering for a crushing, overwhelming charge, the Battle of the Big Hole was close to becoming a second Little Big Horn and the wounded Gibbon another Custer.

However it is called—good luck or an act of God—the only thing which, probably, could have saved the gasping men in the blue there on the knoll happened. When the blazing fire was only a few yards from the entrenchments, the wind veered. Shifting dead about, it blew the flames back on their own smouldering embers where they died out. A hoarse cheer rang out, as half-choked doughboys and troopers stood to arms again.

On the third day General Howard came galloping up at the head of two troops of cavalry. Joseph's scouts had told him of the coming relief, and under cover of night he and his tribe had vanished. His casualties were eighty-nine dead, including some women and children, to the Army's twenty-nine killed and forty wounded. But he had only narrowly missed victory and he was in the clear once more with a commanding lead.

IT was evident that more troops would be needed if so formidable and elusive an adversary was to be rounded up, but no more were immediately available. At this time serious labor riots were occurring in the East, and frontier posts had been drained of Regulars to support the Militia.

Since Gibbon and his command were *hors de combat,* Howard took the pursuit. The one-armed general, figuring that Joseph would march southeast through the Rockies toward Yellowstone National Park, sent a detachment under Lieutenant George R. Bacon to bar the Indians' way in Tacher's Pass.

Bacon rode fast on direct lines, occupied the pass and held it for two days, with never a sign of the Nez Percés. Then he started back to report to his commanding officer. In the meantime Joseph had executed a master stroke of strategy. When his scouts informed him of the departure of Bacon's detachment and of the fact that Howard was standing fast, the chief halted his retreat. He mounted up forty-five of his braves, formed fours and in the dead of night rode straight into Howard's lines. A sentry, seeing a cavalry column looming up in the dark, mistook it for Bacon and his men returning. The riders were past him before he belatedly challenged and gave the alarm. Whooping and shooting, Joseph and his warriors swooped down on the camp. They drove off all the pack mules. Troop horses were saved, for the most part, by their secure picketing, but the Indians cut hobbles and stampeded some of them.

Amid the confusion three troops were pulled together and galloped furiously in pursuit of the raiders. Joseph was waiting for them. He hit them head-on and on both flanks. Two troops reeled back, and the third was cut off and surrounded in a lava bed where it dismounted and fought for life. A lieutenant was struck by a bullet which entered one hip pocket and went out the other, having pierced both buttocks. Indian snipers crawled close enough to shoot one soldier in the back at fifteen feet. Other defenders dropped, badly wounded, but the position was strong and they held it. When Howard came up, Joseph was gone—off through the now-open pass. Pursuit was stalled by the necessity of sending back for more pack mules.

Through the August glory of the Yellowstone rode Joseph and his Nez Percés. That region had been made a National Park five years previously. Though it was still little known, two parties of tourists, vanguard of the millions who now visit it annually, were enjoying camping trips

there. They were well equipped and armed against possible encounters with bears, tame descendants of which roam the park today. They were not, however, prepared for Indians on the warpath.

The party from Radersburg, Montana, consisting of six men and two women, was suddenly jumped in its peaceful camp. Joseph's strict orders that the women be not harmed were obeyed, but one of the men was killed and a second shot and left for dead.

Two of the ten men in the other party, which was from Helena, Montana, were killed. One of the survivors was the camper's Negro cook who soon after he had dodged the Indians had just as narrow an escape from a large and angry bear.

Joseph pushed on. But the telegraph was clicking frantically again. Troops began closing in from various quarters. The Fifth Cavalry rode down from the Little Big Horn country. Six troops of the Seventh under Colonel Samuel D. Sturgis advanced to block the red anabasis. The indomitable Howard still hung stubbornly on the trail. And now when Joseph was hardest pressed, his scouts for once failed him. They reported that a strong force of troops lay in his path across the shortest and best route to Canada. As a matter of fact, the force was only a small detachment of cavalry under Lieutenant Hugh L. Scott. This fatal misinformation diverted Joseph into a long, difficult detour.

"We knew," declared the chief, "that the distance was great, but it is easier to travel and fight than to die." Due north through Montana he urged his tiring tribe. Critical though his dilemma was, his genius was equal to it. He swerved, deceived his pursuers and left them baffled behind him. When he could no longer avoid it, he halted and at Canyon Creek on September 13, 1877, gave battle to three hundred and fifty cavalrymen from Howard's and Sturgis's commands. Valiantly Sturgis stormed the ridges, held by the Nez Percé riflemen. He captured nine hundred ponies and exacted a toll of twenty-nine enemy dead for his own loss of three. But his men and horses were exhausted when night fell and he could not prevent Joseph's escape.

On Joseph marched, brushing aside small bodies of troops in his way, on toward the Bear Paw Mountains, only thirty miles or so from the Canadian border. He reached them and made camp—rest for the weary—beside Snake Creek on the mountains' north slope.

JOSEPH could not know that there was still another Army column to be reckoned with. Far off to the east Colonel Nelson A. Miles was waiting at Fort Keogh, Wyoming, for a report. Galloping couriers brought him despatches from Sturgis detailing the probable route of the Nez Percés. There might yet be time to intercept them.

Miles moved at once with six companies of the Fifth Infantry, some of them mounted; two troops of the Second Cavalry, three of the Seventh, white and Indian scouts, and two field guns. And he moved fast, covering two hundred and sixty-seven miles in twelve days. On the cold, stormy morning of September 30, 1877, he was in position to attack. Battle orders issued, the troops closed quietly in on the crescent-shaped ravine where the Nez Percé tepees were pitched.

Some say Joseph believed he had crossed the border and was safe. Howard and Sturgis had deliberately held up their pursuit so as not to alarm him. At any rate he had no sentries out.

Down on his camp thundered the cavalry and mounted infantry, sighted only as they broke from cover for the last dash. Yet not even the shock of the surprise could break the stalwart Nez Percés. In the camp and on the ridges Joseph rallied his veterans. Troops of the Second Cavalry captured the pony herd, but the Seventh, charging a ridge, faced a deadly blast of fire. Captain Moylan and Lieutenant Godfrey, survivors of the Little Big Horn, were shot from their horses, severely wounded, and many another saddle emptied all along the line. The Seventh, its fighting spirit undimmed, dismounted, deployed and thrust ahead. Close to the summit, it was halted but held on. There an orderly from Miles found the squadron commander, Captain Owen Hale, lying among the prone troopers who were maintaining a rapid fire on the enemy. "The General's compliments and he directs"—the orderly began the military formula. But Hale didn't turn or answer. He was dead. Every other officer but one of the squadron had been

killed or wounded in that charge. Casualties were fifty-three out of one hundred and fifteen engaged.

Joseph not only held his camp but under fire made it strongly defensible. With knives, tomahawks, frying pans, and a few spades, the toiling warriors dug entrenchments, startlingly modern in their transverses and connecting galleries. And Joseph had sent messengers galloping to Canada to beg Sitting Bull to ride to his rescue. The Sioux horde was only a day's march distant. If it came riding down on Miles' rear—

Miles also sent for reinforcements and pressed the siege with all his might. He brought up his guns and shelled the camp. Sitting Bull did not come. Instead he moved deeper into Canada; he had had enough of the U. S. Army.

For four days Joseph held out. Then, at last, a white flag fluttered over the Nez Percé trenches.

A warrior advanced with Joseph's affecting message of submission:

"Tell General Howard that I know his heart. What he told me before I have it in my heart. I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead. The old men are all dead. It is the young men now, who say 'yes' or 'no.' He who led the young men [Joseph could not bear to name his slain brother, Ollicut] is dead. It is cold, and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people—some of them—have run away to the hills, and we have no blankets, no food. No one knows where they are—perhaps freezing to death. I want to have time to look for my children, and to see how many of them I can find; maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs, my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever."

It was nearly sunset when Joseph himself rode into the Army lines, head bowed with grief, hands clasped on a rifle over the pommel of his saddle. Dismounting, he strode slowly toward the spot where Miles waited with General Howard who had ridden up with a small escort. Veterans still recall the dignity, the noble aspect of the great chief. From where his scalp lock was bound with otter fur his hair fell in long plaits over his chest. There were bullet scars on his cheeks and wrists and bullet holes through the gray blanket over his shoulders. Silently he proffered his rifle in surrender to Howard. The general generously motioned it toward Miles.

The surrendered tribe straggled in, a pitiful procession—eight-seven warriors, forty of them wounded; one hundred and eighty-four squaws and one hundred and forty-seven children, some of them also wounded and all starved-looking.

With the unhurt warriors shackled, the chief and his band were escorted to the nearest post. There an Army band was guilty of a petty and tasteless gesture of triumph in playing a selection from a current musical comedy: *No, No, Joseph.*

Worst was the stain on the nation's honor by its disposition of the conquered. Miles had pledged the tribe would be returned to a reservation in Idaho. The Government coolly repudiated the terms of surrender and sent the mountain Nez Percés to Indian Territory where the climate decimated them. Although Miles' hands were tied at the time, that honorable officer never rested until in 1884 he succeeded in arranging the return of the tribe to their home lands. There Joseph lived to old age, the patriarch of his people, counselling them against fire-water and other vices and keeping his promise to fight no more forever.

GENERAL SHERMAN called the Nez Percé War one of the most extraordinary of which there is any record. He praised the tribe's skill in using advance and rear-guards, skirmish lines, and field fortifications and for its forbearance, after the first outbreak, from scalping, mutilations, and, for the most part, from wanton slaying of civilians.

The Army had lost twenty-six in killed and wounded to Joseph's two hundred and thirty-eight. In spite of great superiority in strength and the invaluable aid of the telegraph, it had been outgeneraled and, much of the time, outfought. Yet the Army could take pride in bravery displayed on every field and in the dogged perseverance which had prevented the escape of the Nez Percés to Canada and won in the end.

OX-CARTS TO EMPIRE

By RAY NAFZIGER

A creaking ox-cart saved tenderfoot Sam Walls from the desert's deadly grip. And an ox-cart carried him on a peril ride to even a score with the hell-town of Fortuna.

SAM WALLS stepped from the stage coach, as it rolled to a stop in Fortuna, jingling the remaining gold eagles in his pocket and looking like a man who craved action.

Sam was a tenderfoot. A no-good young tenderfoot who had come west and was recklessly squandering an inheritance of several thousand dollars. Part of the money had gone in Tucson, gambling and helling around, until somehow he had gotten on the weekly stage to Fortuna. And Fortuna was a tough little town with most of its toughness stemming from the Gibroy brothers who owned the largest saloon, a big supply store and the wagon freighting line to Tucson. Both brothers could, it was said, cool a keg of beer by just casting their reptile-cold slate eyes over it.

It was unlucky for young Walls—but inevitable—that he fell into the Gibroys' hands.

"Action is it you're wanting, friend?" asked Eb Gibroy genially, and took the tenderfoot in tow.

They had a few drinks at the Gibroy bar; from there it was only a few short steps to a poker game run by Nate Gibroy.

"Mr. Walls wants action," Eb Gibroy told his brother.

Young Walls remembered a day-and-night spree in the Gibroy saloon, and after that nothing. When he woke up, he found himself in a section of what can well pass for hell on earth—an Arizona desert. The morning sun was already pouring down a shriveling heat over sand and rock and cactus.

"How did I get here?" croaked Samuel Seton Walls miserably, but he was too sick to even try to guess. Thirst was turning his throat and mouth to hot ash, while a triphammer operated under a skull already as hot as the iron lid of a cook range. He lay, clothed except for a hat, near a tall giant cactus with nothing to be seen in a hundred miles but mountains shrunken to blue haze in the oven of sky and earth. He sat up and yelled hoarsely for help. Panic-stricken at the silence, he got to his feet and started to run, taking a dozen lead-footed staggering steps before he went down.

He got back a little sanity then. He had to save his strength, there not being much of it. Once more on his feet, fighting off waves of black nausea washing over him, he headed for a little hill from which he hoped to sight the town of Fortuna. Atop it, near exhaustion, he was able to place himself. Fortuna he realized lay far beyond a chain of hills to the north. It was farther than any man could hope to walk in this blazing sun without water; in his condition, poisoned by bad liquor, already so thirsty that he suffered the tortures of the damned, it was hopeless.

HE had been transported far out on the desert and dumped, he guessed, likely on the orders of the Gibroys who wanted to get rid of him in such a way that he wouldn't live to squawk at having been robbed in their saloon. Young Walls cursed in despair and again in a panic started walking blindly in the sun. Again he had a little atom of sense—enough to fashion a framework of sticks covered with his big red neckerchief to shield his bare head from the broiling sun.

After that he just walked aimlessly, panting, becoming weaker, stumbling and falling repeatedly to fight like a madman to get back on his feet.

Before Gibroy could fire again, Sam's lash darted in.

Walking with each step only a few shuffling inches, he headed for a rocky pinnacle. It gave him a destination and an offer of shade. Beyond that he was too far gone to think. When he had wakened he had been deathly sick from rotgut and maybe some kicks on the head, but that was nothing to the sickness that came as the sun literally cooked his tissues dry. If he had been fat, Sam Walls would have died the first hour, but he was spare and thin, with the legs and lungs of a distance runner.

He collapsed just as he reached the pinnacle. A warning rattle came from a snake using the same shade but when Walls lay indifferent to the threat, the snake slithered away.

Walls knew he was close to death; the buzzards would soon gather to pick his bones clean. The pain of swelling tongue and tortured throat, the fever of his burning body, grew steadily while the trip-hammer still rose and fell in his bursting brain. Numbly he prayed for death, a quick one.

He had lain perhaps an hour when into the welter of agony crept an added torture. A sound. A high-pitched hellish note that penetrated Walls' sick brain to rasp against each separate cell.

He tried to think he was imagining it, but when it grew louder, he rolled over and forced his bloodshot eyes to stare into the blazing waste. And there moving waveringly in Walls' blurred gaze was an ox-cart, drawn by a string of oxen, threading its way through the gaunt sahuaros, its square wooden pole frame piled high with cargo. Beside the oxen walked a man. The ox-cart explained the hellish noise; it was the squeak of the dry wood axle against the holes in the solid wheels made of sawed sections of cottonwood trunk.

So slowly did the outfit move that at first Walls thought it a mirage. Noise, however, didn't go with mirages. And suddenly for Samuel Seton Walls that noise was music! Life!

The cart was due to pass two hundred yards away and he gathered himself to get to his feet and walk toward it. What began then was the hardest fight Walls had ever made, a desperate gasping struggle first to get to his knees. He rolled on his face and pushed up with his arms. Resting, he tried again to get to his knees but trembling muscles simply couldn't lift the leaden weight of his body. It was no go. He was too far gone.

Sobbing in despair, he tried to yell, but his faint croaking was no louder than the buzz of a small rattler. And on squeaking wheels, foot by foot, life was passing him by. He was like an exhausted shipwrecked sailor on a raft, unable to wave an arm to a passing steamer.

One last hopeless attempt he was able to make. Taking the makeshift hat he had made of his neckerchief, he placed it on his right foot. Lying on his back, straining every muscle, lifting on the leg with his hands he managed to raise it above him, to move it to and fro feebly.

There was one chance in a thousand that the bullwhacker would see it—and the whine of the ox-cart passed on. Walls collapsed, lying like an empty sack, all will and hope drained from him.

UNCONSCIOUSNESS came mercifully, and then pain again. Water was trickling against his horribly swollen tongue. Walls opened his eyes to look into the face of a gray-mustached Mexican holding him in his arms. Then the water stopped and feebly Walls fought for more. The Mexican shook his head.

"Too mucho water ees no good. Too mucho water kill joos like too mucho no-water." He spooned a little more water against Walls' blackened tongue and then bathed the heated body with a wet rag.

Again Walls' senses faded. When he came to it was dark and he was lying on a blanket by the side of the ox-cart, with a small fire a few feet away. From a sooty pot the leathery-faced Mexican trickled down Walls' throat a little warm coffee with a dash of potent Mexican liquor.

Walls with the Mexican acting as nurse slept fitfully during the night. By morning he could chew on a flat cornmeal tortilla. When the ox-cart journeyed on south, Walls was lying in a little depression on top the load, with a piece of tarpaulin raised above him for shade.

The springless cart jolted him unmercifully, but he didn't mind that: the cart meant water and food—life. For three days they traveled to reach a desert tank where the oxen could fill up on water and graze on a little coarse forage. Here the Mexican camped for two days, resting for the real ordeal of the journey which was directly ahead, a long desert sink so hellishly hot that travel must be at night.

By then Walls was able to eat his share of beans and jerky and tortillas. From the little English the Mexican spoke, Walls learned that they were bound for a village somewhere far to the south—a place called San Justo. His rescuer's name was Justo —Justo Reyes.

For two days the long-legged yellow and brindle and spotted Sonora oxen had grazed on the little patch of forage, chewing their cuds solemnly and filling themselves to bursting with water, as if they knew what lay ahead. Here after two huge barrels of water were lashed to the ox-cart, they went on into the night. The stars were so close that one could almost touch them. The driver popped his whip and sang Spanish songs. Walls himself for some reason felt like singing.

They traveled all night and part of the morning, stopping in the shade of a rocky hill when the sun became unbearable.

At dark when they went on Walls started to climb back into the cart, but Justo grinned and shook his head, kicking his rawhide *zapateros* against the ground.

"Too mucho es'-sand," he explained. "Too mucho por bools. You more better walk, no?"

Walls got the point. The sand was loose and deep; a passenger meant too much extra weight.

Grumbling, sweating, he trudged alongside the creaking cart laboring through the deep sand, watching the sand particles fall from the wheels in little moonlit cascades.

For him still weak from his ordeal, the first hour was hell. But the oxen moved so slowly that he could keep up; through

the deepest sand with necessary rests they could travel at but little more than a mile an hour. Again in the morning they camped, the men to lie in the shade of the cart, the oxen to eat the grain Justo carried for them.

Night after night as they crawled through the emptiness under the low-hanging stars, a change came over young Sam Walls: a re-birth.

HIS hair-thin escape from death's door had started it. And now, moving with the plodding oxen, hearing the whine of the slow-rolling big wood wheels and the occasional popping of Justo's big whip, Walls fell in spirit into the same slow pace. Falling under the spell of a desert night and the unhurried march of the oxen, for the first time in his life Walls was happy. So happy he occasionally yelled jubilantly at the stars.

He was having a good time, just walking along with Justo and those snail-like steers, camping to eat brown beans flavored with hot chili, chewing jerky, devouring stacks of tortillas, drinking coffee made from alkali waterholes. He helped Justo yoke up the big steers and spelled Justo off in driving them, swinging the big whip, making it pop like a gun. Justo was a master hand with a whip, able to send the lash to a target as surely as a man could shoot a bullet. Young Walls learned fast; for hours at a time he swung and popped the braided length of rawhide.

They pulled out of the desert finally, into the foothills of a high peak, to roll up a canyon which widened suddenly into an oasis of green fields guarded by a settlement of brown adobe houses. This was San Justo, to which the ox-cart was bringing supplies from the outside world. The whole populace flocked to greet Justo's cart, staring wonderingly at the stranger. Justo exhibited Walls proudly, relating how he had seen the moving cloth out of the corner of an eye; how he had debated going to investigate; how he had brought Walls back to life.

Justo took Walls in to live with his large family, and Walls fell in with the peaceful life of the village. San Justo liked the blond young gringo and he liked the simple people of San Justo.

They showed him their wheat fields, the rows of green corn as tall as young trees, their chili and bean patches, all irrigated from the little canyon stream. On the adjoining slopes and ridges ran cattle and sheep and goats and in and out of the village wandered great flocks of tame turkeys.

There was no way for Walls to leave, but he did not want to go. He was content to live in the village, to help in the fields, hoeing corn and beans, cutting wheat with a scythe to be threshed by the hoofs of goats and taken to the *molino* to be ground into flour.

He needed no money. Money in San Justo almost had no existence. Although their granaries were overflowing with grain, there was no place to sell it. They had cattle and sheep to feed ten times their number of people, but there was no market. As for turkeys, a whole city could have been provided with Thanksgiving birds.

When fall came to San Justo, those turkeys gave an idea to Walls who had Yankee trading blood in him. In the town of Fortuna there would probably not be a single gobbler for Thanksgiving. He remembered a story he had heard of a Californian who had driven a big flock of turkeys to a Nevada mining town to sell for the holidays. Why couldn't he make a similar drive to Fortuna? Justo was planning another trip for supplies, and he could carry feed and water for the turkeys. The summer heat was over.

Walls bought the birds and their feed for next to nothing, using some twenty-dollar certificates sewed in his leather belt where they had escaped the notice of the Gibroys. In October they started, with the turkey flock following the creaking ox-cart out of the mountains, hazed along by Walls and two helpers. Luck was with him. The desert's heat was not unbearable for the birds. At night light bamboo poles were set up as roosts.

Arriving in Fortuna two weeks before Thanksgiving, the flock was corraled like cattle and offered for sale. For each bird Walls got a flat five dollars, except for a few raffled off for much more money. In a few days every back yard in Fortuna had a turkey tied by a leg, waiting execution.

The Gibroy brothers were away in Tucson bringing a wagon train of supplies for their store and saloon. Sam Walls had

not forgotten he had a score to settle with them; he had no doubt that they had stranded him on the desert.

IT was partly his trading instincts and partly the desire to settle with the Gibroys that took him to see Vance Cogwell, owner of the Silver Queen mine which was Fortuna's sole excuse for existence.

"I suppose you know the Gibroys are getting rich fast selling flour and meat to your miners at hold-up prices?" Walls asked the mine owner.

Cogwell looked at Walls, shrewdly appraising him. "Their prices are high," he admitted. "But the Gibroys claim they pay big money for flour in Tucson and that freighting it here across the desert with mule teams is costly. There's been plenty complaints that the Gibroys charge robbery prices but can you do any better?"

"I can sell good flour, not that sawdust the Gibroys handle, for less than half their price. For your Mexican miners I can bring in meal ground from blue flintcorn, the only kind fit for making tortillas, at a third of what the Gibroys charge. The same goes for the beef and mutton I can deliver here."

"If you do all that," Cogwell warned him, "you'll be fighting the Gibroys. And they're tough men to buck."

Walls grinned bleakly. "I found that out. There's a lot of grain and mutton and beef down in San Justo. I'll make it my business to freight it up here."

Cogwell shook his head. "That's a long stretch of waterless desert to cross."

"Not for ox teams. They're slow but sure. They get where they head for; they're made for the desert. The deserts can lick mules and horses but they can't lick ox teams."

In the town he bought all the available sacks and enough heavy wire to use for the barrels which he planned to have native carpenters make in San Justo. Then he, Justo and the turkey herders started their long journey back, Sam Walls turning over schemes in his head as he trudged beside the ox-cart.

He would set the little mill to grinding wheat and corn day and night. From his turkey sales he had enough capital to buy a few oxen and carts of his own; the rest he would hire. The remainder of his money would go to purchase cargoes. Meanwhile he would hire other carts to take grain and fodder up the trail to be left to feed the cattle and sheep he planned to drive to Fortuna later.

On his return trip to Fortuna young Sam Walls led a train of a dozen ox-carts, groaning under loads of wheat flour and cornmeal, dried beef and mutton, frijoles and chili and garbanzos.

The vehicles creaked into the yard behind the little store of an Anglo with whom Walls had arranged to handle his San Justo freight. Even before the carts were all unloaded, news of the low prices to be charged for San Justo flour and other supplies brought the town rushing to stock up with flour and jerky and beans, enough to last them for weeks.

Those prices, cutting a half under the Gibroys, must have been a thunderbolt to the brothers. Walls knew the two weren't the kind to surrender their profits without a fight. He expected trouble and he had worn a .44 single-action Colt into San Justo. While the ox-carts wended their way north, he had practiced shooting the weapon; he would need practice, for Eb Gibroy was counted a professional gunman and his brother Nate was almost as expert.

When he went to see Cogwell, the mine owner greeted him worriedly.

"You made it all right, this trip," admitted Cogwell. "But can you keep it up? Summer as well as winter?"

"Keep it up?" Walls asked surprised. "I've just started. Next trip I'm bringing in sheep and cattle to be held here and butchered out as needed. There's enough flour and beef and mutton in San Justo to feed two towns like this. I'm taking a stock for a store in San Justo so I'll be carrying cargoes both ways. I'll have a train leaving San Justo every month."

"Steers are mighty slow," said Cogwell.

"Slow but sure," said Walls. "You needn't be afraid of oxen failing to get across the desert. Those long-horned Mexican steers may get down to skin and bone but they don't quit traveling."

"The Gibroys called on me today," said Cogwell. "They said if I allowed you to freight in here they'd quit. I told them I wouldn't stop you, but that means depending on your ox teams to feed the town.

We've got to be sure your ox-carts get here regularly."

"They'll get here," said Walls confidently. "And later on I'll start ox teams freighting between here and Tucson."

"See that they get here," said Cogwell brusquely. "If there should be a food shortage, the mine would have to shut down and that would ruin me. I've got a certain payment to make every month; if it's not made, the mine will be taken away from me. And better watch out for the Gibroys; they're killers."

"That's no news to me," returned Walls. With his train of carts he pulled out that afternoon, taking the street that passed the Gibroy saloon. Justo had advised him to take another street. Sam Walls himself thought that might be smart but he had too much pride to dodge the Gibroys. It would be easy for them to blast him down from a doorway as he passed but he doubted they would try that. Fortuna would not stand for a bushwhack killing. If one of the pair, however, should kill Walls in an open gun fight, he would go clear.

Walls, in the lead with his bull team was approaching the Gibroy saloon when Eb stepped out to stand in the middle of the street. Eb was wearing a sixshooter and his face was contorted with rage.

WALLS, with his rawhide braided whip looped over his shoulder, the butt in his hand, stepped forward as the oxen halted. He had a flashing memory of the torture which he had undergone on the desert and rage shot through his slim body in hot flashes.

"Damn you, Gibroy, out of the way!" he yelled.

Gibroy smiled a little and then suddenly his hand darted down to his sixshooter. He had no doubt but that he could best this tenderfoot in a gun duel.

Walls in his fury queerly wasn't thinking of the .44 on his hip. He was no gunman; he was a bullwhacker. The shot-loaded butt in his hand rose and went swiftly back to send the whip length forward with the speed of lightning. Gibroy's Colt had just cleared leather when the split end of the lash struck his face. It hit just below the right eye, gouging out a chunk of hide and flesh and temporarily blinding that eye. Gibroy bellowed savagely, a roar that was heard for blocks, but despite the pain he leveled the sixshooter and fired. It was a blind shot, the slug passing ten feet over Walls' head. Before Gibroy could fire again, the lash darted in again, to gash open a cheek. It was more than Gibroy could bear; he dropped his sixshooter and flung up his arms to cover his head.

A warning hiss came from Justo behind Walls and he swung to see Nate Gibroy coming from the saloon, carrying a Winchester carbine.

Again Walls sent out the long bull whip. It curled around Nate Gibroy's neck, fastening there in a tight loop. Walls jerked on the whip just before Nate pulled the trigger. The shot from the rifle dug into an adobe wall across the street.

Gibroy, throwing down the lever of the Winchester in hot haste, was off balance and a two-handed jerk on the whip yanked him from his feet. He scrambled to his knees, however, to raise his rifle for another shot. Walls ran in, to strike with the leaded butt of his bull whip. It smashed into Gibroy's jaw, knocking him flat, but doggedly he turned the barrel toward Walls.

Walls kicked the barrel aside and struck again. This time Gibroy crumpled as if he had been kicked by a mule. It was only then that Walls thought of the sixshooter he carried. He drew it, to turn toward the saloon doorway, on guard against attack from the hard cases that tended bar and trimmed suckers for the Gibroys. None of them even stuck out a head; for one reason Justo had his old muzzle-loading shotgun to his shoulder, ready for action.

As Nate Gibroy groaned and moved a little and his brother cursed with the pain of his slashed face, the town marshal came running up. He was not needed; the fight was over; the Gibroys had had enough.

The ox-carts rumbled on out into the desert. It was miles before Walls' anger subsided. He should have killed the Gibroys, he realized, as they had intended to kill him. Alive, the Gibroys were a deadly menace. They would try to get him again, the next time from ambush.

That attack did not come on Sam Walls' next trip north when he brought sheep and cattle. Nor did it come on the second one. It did not even come when one of

his newly-purchased ox-cart trains went boldly to Tucson to haul out supplies for the mines and to bring merchandise to Fortuna. Part of those supplies went to San Justo—taking to the village steel plows and grain reapers, carpets, window glass, furniture, bolts of cloth, dresses and hats, mirrors—things which had passed for impossible luxuries in San Justo before the coming of the gringo ox-cart freighter and trader.

The mule and horse teams of the Gibroys could not compete with the oxen and their bullwhackers and the Gibroys began to withdraw from the freighting business. Slow the oxen were but sure, and "Sure Slow" Walls the young freighter came to be called.

Walls was losing his uneasiness over the Gibroys when without warning they struck.

HE was in San Justo at the time, having sent a train north weeks before. Walls was leisurely getting ready to follow with another caravan when the Fortuna store-keeper who handled his San Justo flour and meat shipments rode in on a horse that was all but dead from the long desert trip. He shouted hoarsely for Walls.

"Hell's broke loose," he burst out when Walls appeared. "Gang of men dressed like Apaches jumped your last ox-train just south of Fortuna. Burned the loads and the carts. They weren't Apaches. The Gibroys hired them, but it can't be proved —the Gibroys were in Fortuna at the time. And more'n that, the Gibroys been sending men into my store to buy up all the flour and beans in stock. I sold out clean, figuring on that train coming in. The Gibroys claim their store is empty. That means there's no grub in town. People there will starve."

"Can't you get stuff hauled from Tucson?"

"The Gibroys won't haul anything and other freighters are too scared of the Gibroys' 'Apaches' to make the trip. What's happened is that the Gibroys are in cahoots with the bank Cogwell owes money to for developing his mine. If there's no grub, the mine will have to shut down. That means Cogwell can't make his payment on time, and he loses the mine."

Sam Walls' mouth tightened. Cogwell had depended on him to get grub to the town; now through no fault of his own, Walls had failed. Rather than starve, the miners would quit Fortuna; try to trek out with their families to Tucson afoot if necessary.

Walls swore. "I'll get you a fresh horse to ride back to Fortuna. Tell Cogwell to sit tight; I'll have grub there. It'll be there sure and this trip it won't be slow."

He began shouting orders. Boys raced out to drive in oxen from pastures, while the rest of the village hurried to load carts and to fill water barrels. In two hours ten ox-carts loaded with food and barrels of water were rolling north, drawn by the strongest oxen of the village and accompanied by a dozen men, all well armed.

It was the beginning of the hot season again, and making speed in the killing heat seemed impossible. There would be no water until they reached *Tinaja Azul,* the tank where a supply of water was found the year around. To provide water for the dry haul Walls was taking two extra carts loaded with barrels of water; these would turn back after the water was used.

Hour after hour, the big carts rolled northward, to the tune of creaking axles, popping whips and the hoarse shouts of drivers. Sam Walls headed the caravan, setting the pace and planning the stops ahead to take advantage of a little available forage which could be used to eke out the feed carried on the carts.

A furnace-like heat billowed in on them immediately they dropped into the sand rock waste of the long sink. Walls knew then that the drive would be a man-killer and ox-killer. They could not afford to travel only at night, laying over the long hot days; they could rest only a few hours. Water was doled out sparingly, just enough to keep the oxen moving, and when that was gone, they judged they could barely reach the *Tinaja Azul,* after which a long dry stretch remained to Fortuna, broken by a single spring.

The steers bellowed mournfully when the water gave out, but they moved through the furnace-like heat unfalteringly, great horned heads bowed under the cottonwood yokes, pulling steadily through sand and dry and rocky washes. The eight food carts halted only in the extreme heat of the day.

Ahead loomed through the heat hazes the sharp peak in which *Tinaja Azul* provided a never-failing store of water. Miles distant from the peak the steers seemed to remember that water, for they quickened their pace, and the drivers had to force themselves to keep up. They moved all of one day to pull after dark into a rocky bowl rimmed with clumps of high prickly pear growing out of sand and stone. In that rocky bowl a series of pools caught flood water. The carts halted and the drivers strode wearily with pails to the edge of the first pool.

Then at what they saw, from a dozen cracked lips came loud curses. The tanks were dry. Tracks showed that a band of riders had halted at the place to empty the reservoirs, leaving only a cracked plaster of dried mud in the bottoms.

WALLS stood, shoulders drooped, too overwhelmed by this disaster to curse the Gibroys. It was four days' drive to the next water, a small spring that could not be harmed by the Gibroys. The oxen could never make it nor could they reach water on the back trail. They were done, and he would have to fail Cogwell and Fortuna, leaving the people there either to starve or try to make it out to Tucson.

Recovering a little, Walls suddenly cursed the desert as he had done that day when it had nearly killed him: blaspheming the great emptiness baked by merciless sun, its rocks and sand and the high weird growths of prickly pear which grew in huge-stemmed clumps about the tanks. He had lied to Cogwell when he said the desert could not lick oxen. It had these oxen licked. It had him licked.

Then he glanced at the prickly growth again, and stopped swearing. He was wrong. They weren't licked—not yet. The men had returned to slump by their ox-carts, exhausted. Walls shouted at them and led them up the slope to the nearest clump of prickly pear. Several men carried machetes and with these they set to work, hacking out piles of the great oval pulpy stems, while the others dragged them to a fire to singe off the spines. Chopping them into pieces, they carried them to the oxen. The animals only snuffed at them, refusing to eat, although the bruised pulp held undoubted moisture.

Walls had an idea: he brought out kegs of sorghum from the carts and smeared the sweet thick liquid over the pear. The oxen began to chew. The pear was a poor substitute for water, but had lived for months on waterless mesas obtaining both moisture and food from the arid vegetation. The San Justo draft steers were cousins of those camel-like animals. Ordinary farm draft oxen would never even have reached the tank, but these steers were rawhide tough and they had fighting hearts; their breed had died in the bull-rings fighting hopeless odds. They were tough enough now to eat prickly pear plants and to move the carts on when they had rested. Part of the loads were cached near the tanks and in their place the carts carried great bundles of the prickly pear for use on the way. There was enough succulence in the plants and the sorghum to enable the animals to chew the dry pear and move steadily on through hell, although they gaunted down until their big ribs pushed out the thick vari-colored hides.

When the train pulled up out of the long sink, the carts rolled along more easily. What was a journey of four days they did in less than three, to reach the spring. It was too small to provide more than half rations of water, but Fortuna at last was within striking distance. Which meant also that the Gibroy gang was within striking distance of the ox-carts. The storekeeper had taken back word that the carts were coming; it was only reasonable to suppose that the Gibroys would plan to prevent their arrival.

Anticipating an attack, the drivers carried their weapons ready for action while Sam Walls ranged ahead of the caravan, scouting several miles in advance of the creaking carts.

He discovered the Gibroy gang one night—a dozen men or more, camped on the far side of a ridge near a little slot through which the carts would have to pass. Plainly they were waiting here to attack; to surprise the San Justo drivers as they strung through the rocky defile.

Walls hurried back to the train and ordered camp made. It was four or five hours until morning. After resting until near dawn, he led all but two of the drivers to approach the ridge of rock from the back. Crawling close to the camp

fire which by now was a bed of coals, the group waited until down trail the loud squeaking of axles and wheels sounded, two carts moving along the trail.

One of the men sleeping about the fire, Ed Gibroy, got up to kick up the flames. The camp was in a little cup where the light of the fire would be hidden and a breeze would blow the warning smoke away from the moving carts.

"Get up, they're coming!" said Eb Gibroy. "And don't let a man git away. This time we're makin' it a massacre, so bloody a killin' there won't be any more freighters darin' to come out of San Justo."

This was to be, Walls guessed, a simple massacre of all the ox-cart men so there would be none left to tell whether the attackers were Apaches or not. If this job was done right, the Gibroys would be masters of Fortuna with a share in the big silver mine and rich enough to silence any suspicions that they and not Apaches had perpetrated the ox-cart massacre.

NATE Gibroy joined his brother and in leisurely fashion the other men prepared to get up. There sounded the click of a rifle—one of the San Justo weapons—being cocked. Eb, placing a coffee pot on the fire, turned his head.

"Who's there?" he called.

"Me, Sam Walls," came the reply from the rocks rimming the little cup. "Those carts you heard are only two; the rest of us have got you surrounded and covered. Put up your hands, all of you."

Eb Gibroy growled and whirled, to fire his six-shooter at the unseen speaker. A blast from Justo's shotgun sent him reeling back, to fall by the side of the fire. His brother snatched up a rifle and sent a bullet ricochetting off a boulder by Walls' side. Then a half-dozen teamster guns roared together, spinning Nate Gibroy around before he fell. Two other men in the gang tried to get into action but the little fire revealed them and they went down. The rest, realizing it was suicide to resist that ring of guns, raised their hands high and submitted meekly to being disarmed.

Eb Gibroy was dead; Nate lived an hour or so before cashing in. By then Walls and three of the San Justo teamsters were ready to ride to Fortuna, using the horses captured from the gang. They took in the prisoners, electrifying the town with the story of the ambush. They returned with two wagons loaded with barrels of water.

Then the carts moved on.

It was late that night when the caravan reached Fortuna, the squeaking carts rolling along the main street, with the moon silvering the tips of the big horns. All of Fortuna's population lined the street to cheer hoarsely and to run out and pat the rough hides of the animals that had saved them from disaster.

The mine owner Cogwell was moved into taking off his hat to the tall gaunted creatures plodding into the town.

"Sure Slow" Walls, the one-time tenderfoot who had been saved by an ox-cart, in turn had used an ox-cart caravan to save from disaster a whole town.

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THE EDITOR

COVERED-WAGON PASSENGER

SIRS:

I have been given a copy of your magazine FRONTIER STORIES and like it so well that I have sent for the next issue.

Those old-time letters please me as I was a covered-wagon passenger and remember many humorous and thrilling incidents that occurred on the six-months' trip through the Indian-infested country when the savages were on the warpath. Naturally, I enjoy the stories about those strenuous times.

Mrs. E. J. Anderson,
Gilroy, Calif.

FROM THE OREGON TRAIL

SIRS:

Having read "Oregon Ho!" and "Sabers and Scalp-Knives," by William Heuman, I must say that he really knows his subject. And he does keep the suspense stalking through.

Some authors write at great length about their characters, their emotions, etc.; but he merely writes enough about the people in his stories so that you can get an idea of what they are like, then he writes the story with one event following another until the conclusion.

I lived in Idaho for sixteen years before moving to the Oregon coast by way of the old Oregon Trail and I know many old-time yarns of the region. Whenever pioneer picnics were held, I was always on the front bench to hear the authentic tales from the old-timers themselves, of their trials and hardships in settling the West.

From all of my knowledge of the early frontier days, I truly agree with other Pony Express writers in saying that there is more truth than fiction in FRONTIER STORIES. And I want to add that Mr. Heuman's stories are really lifelike. I enjoy FRONTIER STORIES very much, and am sorry they are not published oftener than four times a year.

Fern Farris,
Rainier, Oregon

SIRS:

I started reading your magazine last summer and cursed my luck for not running into it sooner. One reason that I like your mag is that it does not feature a bunch of singing cowboys. The characters in the stories you publish are not just a group of people who talk and shoot; they are the very spirits of those men who died on the Little Big Horn—men who hunted, trapped, and scouted the rolling plains of the wilderness—and of the frontier women who stood by their menfolk through thick and thin. And even the American Indian, who usually plays the under-dog in your stories, can be proud that writers have not forgotten his heroic fight to keep his West free—the West that strengthened the American empire.

Today the white man and the red man still fight; but they are united against a common foe—the Jap.

I especially liked the installments of Fairfax Downey's "Indian-Fighting Army." I would appreciate it if you could tell me where I could buy the complete book. Union cavalry stories are my dish. "Sabers and Scalp-Knives," by William Heuman, was a six-shot story.

Vincent Stephen Petterson,
Chicago, Ill.

★ The Downey book may be a little hard to get. Try a book store, and if that doesn't get results send to Charles Scribner's Sons through the bookseller.

TRASH—OR HISTORY

SIRS:

I have been reading FRONTIER STORIES and other Western-story publications for a long time, and I have never written a letter either criticizing or favoring the respective magazine. But, after reading Eustace Rutherford's letter condemning the many magazines which try to bring back in the minds of the people the days of the old West, I say, what utter rot!

Did it ever occur to this connoisseur of reading matter that there might be a great many people who enjoy this "trash"?

Mr. Rutherford criticized wagon people for fighting Indians. How does he suppose the West was settled?—with bean blowers?

If everybody had the Rutherford viewpoint, there would be no point in fighting for our country. After all, in a few years the history of this present war would be only "outdated trash."

James Tatlow, Jr.
Lawrence, Mass.

HELL'S CARAVAN

By M. HOWARD LANE

THE Carson Sink Camp was an oasis to those emigrants who had travelled near three thousand miles to view fabled California, and at the same time it was a disappointment, for the high barrier of the Sierra Nevadas still lay between them and the promised gold of the Sacramento.

Willow-lined Argonaut Creek, and a few gnarled sycamores gave their modicum of shade to the camp where incoming emigrant trains rested galled and weary oxen before going on.

Here a man who had been misfortune's victim might find an opportunity to join some on-going train. That at least was

Dust in the east, and Thorpe Daniels hailed it as a boon. He could not know that the coming caravan was marked for a fearful end in a desert of whitened bones.

A Novelet of Treachery on the California Trail

Thorpe Daniels' hope, but as the weary weeks had passed and no Conestoga caravan had lifted high tilts above the desert's eastern edge he had almost ceased to hope for the coming of a wagon-master who might find a place for a scout with a crippled hand.

Thorpe flexed his fingers as he took his accustomed afternoon seat on a tall boulder at the edge of the Creek camp. From the rock he could watch for sign of wagons making their slow way here across the Salt Desert.

The eyes of friendly women in the emigrant camp, where a few families had decided to wait through the winter before

tackling the long onward trail to Oregon, watched Thorpe sympathetically. They saw him seated, then shook their heads sadly, and their tongues began to clack.

One shook her head worriedly.

"I hear tell from that last trapper who come through that Sioux on the plains have slaughtered so many emigrants that none are making it across South Pass. An' them that have reached Salt Lake are being forced to pay the Mormons tribute. I wonder what's going to happen to that poor Thorpe Daniels?"

"I have heard it said," the woman's companion answered; "that Mr. Daniels is apt to strike out for California alone if a train doesn't come along soon. And he's just the one to take that chance. A shame it is, that the pack of trappers and scouts who brought him here couldn't have waited until his fever was gone before pulling out. What if his hand was caught in a beaver trap by accident? I still can't see why they didn't wait for his health to mend. Particularly after they told me he stood high in the councils of mountain men."

"He insisted that they go on," the first woman explained patiently. "He is not a man to be burdensome to anyone. And now that he can hold a rifle again you know that the game he has brought in has been worth more than its weight in that California gold people brag about. He's more than paid back our kindness. For one, I hope he stays the winter—"

Her voice trailed off at she stared unseeingly off to the west.

As he hunched atop his lookout, Thorpe knew that he was the subject of conversation beneath the sycamores, and the knowledge made his ears feel hot. Grimly he went to work flexing his right hand, trying patiently to force resilience into muscles that time alone would knit. Yes, time. And until that hand was good as new, Thorpe Daniels knew bitterly that he could not strike out for California alone.

Slowly he twisted on his hard seat, a long, wide-shouldered man in travel-worn buckskins and Crow moccasins. He let his agate-brown eyes wander westward across wide leagues of dangerous desert to the towering barrier of the blue Sierra. Beyond those mountains lay the golden valley of the Sacramento, mecca of thousands since a nugget had been found in the mill-race of Sutter's sawmill at Coloma.

More than the lure of nuggets in American River gravel, though, was calling Thorpe Daniels to California. It was the same urge that had made him disobey a father who had insisted on the completion of a college career for which he had no taste. Restlessness was what some men call it. Fiddle-footed. And yet the real truth was that ten years spent on the frontier had not brought him contentment, for he could not be sure just what he was seeking—

That was why he stared at the distant blue of pine-clad Sierra, and the savage dun hue of the Salt Desert. It was why he wished glumly that he was already there in that yonder land beyond the mountains. For, somehow. Thorpe had the feeling that his restless days would end in California, perhaps on some oak-shaded rancho where a man could grow with a new State.

If only a caravan would come. One willing to take a cripple on with them. He could support the barrel of a rifle in that right hand now, but the fingers would not close enough yet to grasp the Green River blade at his belt, or hold the weight of the long Navy Colt holstered at his opposite thigh. He could not hoist an ox-yoke, or handle an axe; but he could sit a horse and his eyes were keen.

Dispiritedly, Thorpe turned back from his contemplation of the peaks that barred him from California, and as he switched his long length around, something that none of the Carson camp people had seen in a long time caught his eye. It was dust. Dust billowing high into an azure, cloudless sky!

Dust kicked up by the hooves of plodding oxen. Dust rolling upward from beneath high Conestoga wheels. A caravan was coming—at last!

A SHOUT that he couldn't hold back left Thorpe's lips. He saw figures in the camp beneath the sycamores spring to their feet; men and women alike. They came pellmelling toward his lookout rock and their cries echoed his own shout. Worn faces began to smile. Children in homespun raced about with glee, for they knew there would be youngsters in the approaching train with whom to play. Men.

running low on tobacco showed their hopefulness of replacing dwindling supplies. The women thought of news they might learn. And Thorpe thought that now he might be able to start on the last lap of his journey to California.

Purple shadows were washing over the Salt Desert by the time the incoming train splashed across the ford of Argonaut Creek. Gaunt oxen wheeled high-tilted Conestoga and Pittsburgh wagons into an open section of the camp, and Thorpe watched the scene from his place on the high rock. He had asked Eph Saunders, the camp boss, to get word to the wagonmaster of the incoming train that a man was here who wanted to hook up with their outfit. It would break the ice when he approached the leader of the new caravan.

But even as he thought about it, Thorpe felt a frown growing on his forehead. Eyes that years of frontier living had sharpened saw things about this new batch of emigrants that he couldn't understand.

One oddity immediately caught his attention. The travel-stained women of the caravan were making no attempt to greet the emigrants' wives already settled in this Carson Sink camp. There was a sullenness about them that was hard to understand. The men, too, were going about the task of rounding the cavvy with unaccustomed haste into the wagon circle they had formed. Others were cutting wood, and keeping to themselves. Still others were silently unyoking the weary oxen.

It was that silence which puzzled Thorpe. Making camp was usually a noisy, boisterous undertaking.

One man, bigger than the rest in quilled buckskin, appeared to be their leader. His movements about the camp were quick and lithe as a cougar's. A magnificent mane of black hair reached back to the beaded collar of his leather shirt. When he was near, Thorpe noticed that men jumped to hurry their tasks.

"A regular he-heller," the scout muttered half to himself.

Carson camp emigrants who had been joyfully awaiting the sight of new faces, and new tongues to bring them word of happenings along the Oregon-California Trace, were slowly retreating toward their own wagons in abashed confusion.

"Beats me," a voice muttered from the base of the rock.

Thorpe looked down. Eph Saunders was staring up at him out of puzzled blue eyes. "I ain't never seen a bunch like that before," he confided. "Stand-offish as all git out. Their cap'n, that feller in the frilled breeches, calls hisself Bent Arcane. I told him we had a feller wanting to hitch up with them, and he's willin' to talk with ye. He don't have no remarks to make concernin' their back-trail. Just don't have nothin' to say 'ceptin' they are pulling out come mornin'."

Thorpe had noticed another thing about the mystery caravan. "Their stock is g'anted pretty bad," he told the camp boss as he slid to the ground. "A smart captain would rest up for a couple of days before tackling the desert ahead."

"I know that as well as you!" Saunders snapped irritably. "There's something funny about the outfit. Twelve wagons Arcane's got, and that don't seem like a proper-sized train for crossin' plains and mountains. Most captains wait until they can get leastways twice that number before striking out from Council Grove—"

Everything Eph Saunders had said was true, and Thorpe knew that the camp boss was hoping that he would not press his chance to go on with an outfit that acted so strangely.

"I'd wait over, Eph," he murmured as they approached the new camp, "except that I've got to get started for California pronto if I expect to get there before Sierra snow blocks Emigrant Gap."

THORPE ducked beneath a wagon tongue tilted to the endgate of the Conestoga ahead as a girl popped her head through the opening in the tilt above him. "Oh—" Thorpe heard her say in surprise, and he glanced up and straightened.

"You—" she began again.

"I'm from yonder camp, ma'am," Thorpe told her politely, and the smile that came to his lips was the most spontaneous that had touched his face in months. "I've come to see if your captain will take me on to California," he explained.

The girl had been lovely and would be lovely again when the fatigue of this long journey was out of her bones. Tiredness showed in the fine lines etched about her

red lips, and in the shadows beneath her dark eyes. Her body was slender, and yet rounded beneath the drab brown of her dress. But as he studied her, Thorpe read more than fatigue in her face. Fear, sorrow, or both had keyed her to a tight pitch.

He watched the girl's lips part, and then suddenly close at the sound of a step behind him. He had already heard the whisper of moccasins, but the expression that crossed the girl's face had kept him from turning. Now as he saw the words she had been about to speak freeze on her lips, he swung without undue haste to see who was approaching.

The black-haired leader of the caravan stood there, but for a moment Bent Arcane ignored the crippled scout. His eyes, blacker if possible than his hair, were tipped up to the girl in the wagon.

"Sarah," he said sharply, "your mother is asking for you."

"I—I was just going to help her," the girl stammered, "when—when this gentleman surprised me."

She started to climb down across the end-gate, and natural courtesy made Thorpe step forward to help her. Without thinking, he lifted his right hand and caught the girl's elbow, but as her weight came against his palm pain leaped to his shoulder. Instinct made him lose his grip, and sweat broke on his forehead. Pain had whitened his lips when the girl looked up.

"I've hurt you!" she exclaimed. "Mister—"

"Daniels," Thorpe muttered. "Don't feel bad about my hand. It's ached a heap sight worse."

"I'm Sarah Burns," the girl said, and her smile was friendly.

She was probably twenty-one, but Bent Arcane treated her as though she were a child, or a chattel of his own. "If you don't get to helping your mother and the rest of the women prepare supper, you'll find yourself hungry," he warned coldly.

Thorpe watched her speed from them and her run was graceful as the flight of a falling leaf. After she had joined the other women about the cook-fire, Thorpe made another slow turn to face the mystery caravan's leader, and he realized instantly that a more inopportune meeting could not have been arranged. Arcane's face was long and gaunt. Even in the heat of this high desert it looked chilly. But there was nothing chilly about his eyes. Hell-fire and damnation burned in their depths. Bent Arcane wanted no man to look twice at Sarah Burns.

"You're the one Saunders was talking to me about," the captain said abruptly.

Thorpe nodded carefully. "Yes," he admitted. "A trap caught my hand when me and some pards made a set this side of Salt Lake, just for luck. It was luck, all right, but the wrong kind for me. Blood poison set in. I made my friends go on and leave me here. The women in this camp saved my hand, but it ain't much use yet. Howsomever, it's good enough to handle a rifle and ram home a ball. My eyes ain't bad either when it comes to pickin' up Injun sign, so I figured I might scout and hunt for my keep."

Thorpe watched Arcane's eyes narrow, and he was braced for the captain's "no."

But the exact opposite was coming. "Ever been to Californy before?" Bent Arcane asked. At the shake of Thorpe's head, he seemed pleased. "I think we can use you, Daniels," he said crisply. "You'll eat with the rest of us. We're well found, and I've copies of maps Colonel Fremont made when he and Kit Carson crossed Walker Pass into Owens Valley. It will cut a hundred or more miles off the regular route over Emigrant Gap."

Words were on Thorpe's lips, but he stifled them. John C. Fremont, with Kit Carson for guide, had found and named Walker Pass, all right. But this train was already far north of the path those explorers had blazed in 1844.

Thus Bent Arcane was either stupid, or a liar—and the captain did not look stupid.

Why was this man purporting to lead his train of a dozen wagons over a short-cut into California's promised land when the route he wanted lay far to the south, Thorpe asked himself, and he found no answer in his mind. Time might give him the solution, and suddenly the scout knew that wild horses could not keep him from accompanying this mystery caravan.

"You've hired a hand, Arcane," he murmured. "I've my own horse, a bay gelding named Ranger. He'll be glad to travel again, and so will I. Our worst danger from here on will be the Paiutes. They're lizard-eating coyotes who will fill a man

with arrows if they get him alone. Otherwise they will concentrate on your herds. I hear they have a taste for ox meat."

"You have heard a lot, Daniels!" The train captain's long narrow face had hardened. "And I hope you will keep your fears to yourself. We do not discuss matters that might rouse concern in the caravan. Good night to you now, and be ready on that Ranger horse of yours to pull out in the morning."

Thorpe nodded, and he wondered if he could manage to keep his temper under control for the long leagues that still lay between them and California.

"I will do my best," he murmured.

"One more thing, before you leave," Bent Arcane snapped as Thorpe turned to go. "You might as well know that Sarah Burns is my intended wife. She and her mother are travelling to California under my personal escort."

Thorpe felt his lips draw in against his teeth. "I shall remember," he murmured. He turned and walked away.

Eph Saunders met the scout along the creek on the way back to the main camp. "And what do you think of that outfit?"

Thorpe walked a few paces before answering. "I think," he said finally, "that it is a caravan full of fear and hatred. Arcane is playing a game, and he is using human beings for his chess men—"

II

"CATCH UP, catch up!" That cry for five days now had awakened Thorpe at each dawn. Five days, fifty miles, and the Sierras seemed no nearer. They were still a blue barrier barring the southern horizon, but the dun desert was very real about them. Paiutes lurked in cut-bank washes, eager to drive off the cavvy that followed under heavy guard behind the lumbering wagons.

Two dozen cattle, in one lightning raid, had been lost and one of the guards had died in the attack, his body riddled with arrows. They had buried him alongside the dim Trace.

Wing scout for the caravan, Thorpe was away from the wagons between each dawn and dusk which gave him no opportunity to speak alone with Sarah Burns. And as for the evenings, talk was out of the question. After the night meal each family sought their own wagon. None of the jolly group singing that made Argonauts forget the hazards of the day was evident. Nothing livened the drabness.

It helped to increase Thorpe's impression that something was wrong here.

The sixth night came, and the Sierras seemed miraculously nearer. The apparent nearness of the mountains brought smiles to the gaunt faces of women and the harried lips of men who hadn't smiled in days.

Thorpe watched Sarah Burns rise from the circle where all were eating, and she said clearly enough for all to hear: "This is a night for song. I have a banjo in my trunk, but mother has a lot of things packed on top of it. Mr. Daniels, won't you come and help me get it? We'll treat the folks to 'Oh, Susanna—'"

"It is my chore," Bent Arcane said smoothly, and rose from his place beside the cook-fire. "A man with a bad hand shouldn't be lifting packing cases."

"My hand," Thorpe said, and he hardly recognized his own voice, "is fine."

Bent Arcane's laugh was chilly as the snows that would soon mantle the Sierras. He came stepping toward the scout, and Thorpe found himself moving forward to meet the man. He caught a glimpse of Sarah Burns' frightened face, and then the girl was trying to step between them.

Thorpe brushed her aside with his good arm. "This had to come sometime, Sarah. One man's got to be tall around here."

"It won't be you, Daniels," Arcane spoke through set, handsome lips.

The captain lashed out with a whistling blow, and like a dancer, Thorpe ducked. "You've got to do better than that," he taunted, hoping his words might blind Arcane with fury. He sent his own left looping out as he spoke, and the blow grazed the captain's cheek.

Arcane's fists came then like driving pistons. A blow on the chest staggered Thorpe backward. A right smashed through his guard, and he felt the salt taste of blood in his mouth as gore spurted from his nose. The captain was pressing his advantage, boring forward deliberately step by step, and the scout knew he was beaten. His right hand would not close into a fist,

and one stabbing left was not enough to protect himself against the flailing knuckles of the wagon master.

"Stand and take it, damn you!" Bent Arcane rasped.

Thorpe had been constantly backing, hopeful that he might yet draw the captain within range of a left powerful enough to drop him. Against his back then, he felt the sudden heat of the community cook fire, and he knew that another backward pace would carry him into it.

He took a single step forward, and hammered a desperate left straight toward the triumphant face of the wagon master, but the blow found nothing but thin air, for Arcane's right had risen from the neighborhood of his waist and hard knuckles beneath his chin were lifting him from his feet.

Thorpe felt the powerful muscles in his own body growing lax. There was no strength left in his knees. He saw the ground rising, and had only one vagrant glow of satisfaction. He had kept his head, and managed to refrain from striking a blow with his weakened right hand. Then he was on the ground, and the blow to his jaw had paralyzed him from head to heel. Unconsciousness was coming, yet oddly it was not here yet. He could still see, dimly, and hear.

He saw Bent Arcane loom above him, saw the man's hobnailed boot rise, and he read the wicked intent in the other's eyes. He heard Sarah Burns cry out, and he heard the hoarse voice of one of the emigrants exclaim:

"Leave be, Arcane! We felt the same as you when we split from Jim Carrigan's party, and started on alone. We owe Carrigan all the trouble we can make him, but this feller wasn't one o' them. Leave be, I say. Throw him out if yuh want for the Paiutes to scalp, but I draw the line at trompin' him—"

HE had been tromped just the same. That was the first conscious thought Thorpe had when heat that seared his body like the white blast from a furnace roused him to consciousness. He tried to open his eyes and failed, and for a terrorized moment he thought his sight was gone, then the realization came that dried blood had glued his lids together. Thirst burned his throat, and every muscle throbbed with its own individual song of pain.

Some emigrant had remonstrated with Arcane, Thorpe remembered dazedly. But the caravan captain had tromped him just the same. The emigrant had suggested that they throw him out on the Salt Desert for the Paiutes to scalp, and Thorpe, exploring blindly with his hand, touched brittle sage and sand. The feel of it made him want to laugh but he couldn't, for his tongue seemed cloven to his mouth. They'd done a good job in that caravan of mystery, was the wild thought that came into his fogged mind. Yes, a damned fine job. Abandoned him to the Paiutes and the sun, while their wagons rolled on westward.

Another wave of unconsciousness was sweeping over him, and he tried to fight it with all the power of his will.

"Go to sleep again," he muttered the words aloud in an effort to rouse himself completely, "and you'll never see California, and that rancho lookin' out to the sea."

But the unconsciousness was coming despite his talk, and yet oddly enough a girl's voice seemed to be coming right along with it. "Thorpe, Thorpe. I've found you—!"

It sounded like Sarah Burns, but Thorpe knew that couldn't be true. Bent Arcane would never have given her the chance to slip away from the caravan. That was his last conscious thought.

Then blackness swept over him.

The sensation of being pulled through scrubby sage that ripped at his buckskin clothes, and of being slid as gently as possible down the steep sides of a cut-bank wash, was the next impression that roused the scout.

"This ain't the road to hell," he heard himself chuckle wildly. "It's too hot down there for sage and sand—"

"Thorpe," that feminine voice said again, and water, blessedly cool, touched his lips. A damp cloth was at his face suddenly, sponging the dried blood from his eyes and nose.

With an effort, the scout managed to pry his lids apart. For an instant they sagged back as though to close, and then surprise jerked him to full awareness. Staring unbelievingly up, he looked into the face of the Argonaut girl.

"Sarah!" The water had lubricated his

throat and loosened his tongue. "Sarah. You? Here? I—"

"Don't try to talk," the girl commanded. "I left your rifle where I found you. Rest until I come back. Here—" she pressed a pitifully small leather water bag into his hands—"drink when you get thirsty."

Roused completely, Thorpe felt the weight of the bottle. "We'll save it for later," he murmured, and he had to fight down the almost uncontrollable urge to lift the bag to his lips and drain its last drop.

Brain whirling with speculation, he lay still, feeling the little water he already had drunk start to bring the tingle of life back to a body that had been mercilessly beaten.

Shimmering heat devils danced at the rim of the dun-hued cutbank wash across from him. Heat devils that would destroy them unless more water could be found quickly. And the Paiutes had a habit of lurking near the water-holes waiting for lost Argonauts, or men separated from their wagons. There was another danger, too. Sarah had not wasted her strength to drag him into this deep wash without reason. Evidently the fear was in her that Bent Arcane and his men might come looking for them.

The thought made Thorpe glance down at his right hand. He hadn't had much time to think about it, but now the sight of his arm brought a chuckle to his lips. The hand still wasn't worth much, but Arcane and his tromping boots had neglected to undo the slow healing process by smashing it a second time.

That single fact was something a man could almost take as a good omen. "But we'll need plenty more," Thorpe muttered, "before we make it back to the Carson camp. I wonder if she managed to steal a horse for us to ride?"

He heard the crisp sound of the girl's small boots coming back to the wash, and it was his answer. Sarah Burns had left the mystery caravan on foot. Thorpe pulled a ragged breath into his lungs. Swiftly he calculated the miles they had travelled away from the Carson Sink camp. Six days, at ten or twelve miles a day. There were waterholes along the backward trail, but there were Paiutes, too.

That knowledge was a challenge, and Thorpe accepted it as such. A girl with the bravery of Sarah Burns deserved better than a desert death. "We'll make it through," he told himself. "I'm not going to let her die!"

She came sliding into the wash, and her face grew radiant as she saw how he had managed to prop himself against the bank. "You're better!" she exclaimed. "I was afraid they'd broken an arm, or one of your legs."

Sarah was wearing a boy's hickory shirt and brown corduroy breeches. At least she wouldn't be burdened with a woman's bulky clothes on the walk to come. In one hand, Thorpe saw that she had his rifle, powder horn, and shot pouch. In the other she carried a weighted flour sack. Crouched down beside him, she opened the sack and spilled forth its contents.

"Your revolver!" she said proudly. "I thought we might need six quick loads in case six Paiutes saw us all at once." She laughed, almost gaily. "And bread," she went on, "and jerked ox meat from the last one we had to slaughter. So we won't have to turn into lizard-eaters, Thorpe!"

Thorpe Daniels looked at the girl, and he couldn't understand her. She had been sullen, tired, and fearful in Arcane's camp. But there had been the security of numbers. Now she was alone on the desert with a man to whom she'd spoken no more than a dozen words, facing the crazed death that thirst brought, or the shattering horror of a flint-tipped arrow in the back. Yet she could smile. It brought back to his mind all the strangeness he'd sensed in the Arcane caravan. Questions filled his mind, but there were more pressing matters to settle first.

The girl handed him a bit of bread torn from the loaf she had displayed, and a strip of jerky. "Breakfast," she said gaily.

Thorpe accepted the food, and even the movement of laying it on his lap brought torment to bruised muscles. "Talk comes first," he told her gravely. "We've got to decide some things right now. I make it close to sixty-five miles back to Carson Sink, and death will be waiting for us every inch of the way. Your outfit can't be more than five or six miles ahead—even if they moved on without you."

Thorpe spoke slowly because the words

were hard to bring out. "My—my advice to you is to leave me this stuff, and head back to them. You can walk faster than oxen can pull a wagon. You'll meet up with them by sunset, and be safe again. Stay with me—" Thorpe cut his sentence short. Ears keened to habitual alertness had picked up the sound of hooves out along the Trace.

With a movement as clumsy as an old man trying to rise from a chair, the scout pushed the water bag aside, and pulled himself to his feet.

Lithe as a fawn, Sarah Burns was already pressed against the bank, dark eyes on a level with the lip of it. "Arcane," her whisper came faintly to the scout, and he had never heard a word spoken with more venom. "Kill him, Thorpe!" the girl implored. "Shoot him while you've got the chance. He's more dangerous than a mad dog. Kill him, Thorpe!"

IV

THORPE was silent for a time, trying to remember Arcane's talk to the henchmen who had ridden out here with him in search of his body. Arcane had said that Sarah knew nothing. That none of the emigrants knew his plans. And, as he had raked spurs into Ranger's tender flanks, he had mentioned that something would happen within a few more days.

Something would happen in days that were vital now, for evenings brought their warning chill of snows to come, and wagons that were to make California this year had to be through Emigrant Gap ahead of them.

"There's one thing certain," he said slowly. 'Bent Arcane ain't aimin' to take your outfit by way of Walker Pass. You passed the cut-off to Owens Valley many a mile back of Carson Sink."

"That's what a lot of us surmised," Sarah Burns said. "It's one of the reasons the camp has been so glum and full of fear. But we've had to stick with Arcane because there just wasn't anything else we could do. Oh, Thorpe, I—I had a half-crazy idea when I slipped out of the camp to come and find you that perhaps if I was successful we could backtrack and meet Jim Carrigan's train."

Thorpe looked at her, a smile turning his bruised lips. "You and me," he grunted, "are thinkin' a lot alike right now. How far back you figure his outfit to be?"

"I don't know," the girl hesitated. "Arcane has pushed us regardless of loss to our oxen since we parted company. Carrigan was always careful to see that we laid over in good camp-sites every few days to rest our cattle."

"Which makes for faster time when you do catch up and roll," the scout said thoughtfully. "Mebbe he ain't more than two or three days behind. Mebbe not that far. If we're real lucky we might run into 'em this side of Carson Sink."

He stopped right there, knowing that if he said any more he'd put fear into the heart of a girl who had already suffered enough torment. Two days, three, they might last with the meager food she had been able to bring. But they would need water. And Paiute warriors, as inconspicuous as the darting brown lizards on the dun earth, watched every hole.

Thinking of water, Thorpe reached for the bag they had both avoided. His hand touched the leather, and seemed to freeze to its flabby surface. Slowly, a little unbelievingly, he let his head swing around and tip down. A stunted cactus, stubby enough to pass unnoticed, grew in a slight fold of the wash. The earth about it was dark now, and damp.

Sarah Burns had seen the incredulous expression that crossed the scout's bruised face. "Thorpe!" She scrambled around him, and her small hand snatched the limp container. A few drops of water oozed lazily from the rent bottom of the bag. Like something to love, she held the bag against her breast for an agonized moment, then Thorpe saw the caricature of a brave smile touch her lips.

"There, there's still a little left," she stammered. "I—I'm not thirsty. You drink it, Thorpe."

"No!" He spoke the word explosively, realizing how the accident had occurred. "I must have hit the bag with my hand when I got up to take a look-see at Arcane and his cronies. It landed on the cactus. Only a fool like me would have been so danged careless with something we need so much. Now—"

"Now," Sarah Burns' hickory shirt stirred as she drew a deep breath, "we've

got to find a water-hole," and Thorpe knew she was thinking of the Paiutes who might be waiting for them.

He rose with an effort that he tried to conceal from the girl. Stiffness was coming to take the place of pain in his battered body. Teeth tight against his lip, he stumbled to the opposite rim of the wash.

Behind his back, he heard the girl ask simply: "How far is it to water?"

Thorpe calculated swiftly. "The last hole where we filled the barrels is nigh on fifteen miles away," he said reluctantly.

The girl's thin face cleared. "Why, that's not far. We'll make it by midnight, if we walk three miles an hour."

Thorpe felt the stiffness of his muscles. "We shore will," he said dryly, "if we can make three miles an hour."

Night covered the Salt, and the glory of stars overhead sprinkled the ruts of the Trace with faint radiance. Under different circumstances, Thorpe knew as they plodded along, he would have considered the desert beautiful. But this night, the story was different. Every folded wash and every silhouetted clump of cactus and sage held potential danger for them.

Watching the girl, Thorpe could see that each step was becoming more of an effort, and yet she was making a brave attempt to match his own faltering stride. Thorpe figured they had covered ten slow miles already. A few more at the most lay in front of them. He saw the girl's face turn toward him, and she gestured at a flat boulder alongside the Trace.

Thorpe shook his head. "We've got to keep movin'," he croaked the words painfully. "Stop now, and the chill will get in our bones. Then we cain't walk."

He put his right hand under the girl's elbow to help her. A sharper rise than most in this wide Salt Desert lay before them. As their leaden feet started to push them toward its crest, sudden remembrance came to the scout. Beyond this ridge, in a thicket of mesquite, sage, and cactus, lay the spring they were seeking.

"We've made it!" he whispered croakingly to the girl and felt relief make her sag against him, then once again she straightened sturdily.

But they hadn't made it. Thorpe saw that ten minutes later. He had left Sarah below the ridge-line and bellied his own cautious way up for a look at the spring beyond.

At first he'd thought the dark objects scattered haphazardly about the mesquite copse were boulders, and then memory brought its sharp reminder. There had been no piles of stone about the spring two days before when the Arcane caravan had filled their barrels and watered thirsty stock.

The objects he was viewing now, Thorpe realized with a sinking gauntness in his stomach, were rude brush hogans built by a band of Paiutes. They had come here to gather beans from the mesquite trees growing about the waterhole, he guessed.

There was only one thing they could do, Thorpe decided bleakly as he scanned the camp. That was to circle it, and put enough distance between themselves and the Paiutes so that no roving warrior might locate them.

But first they had to have water. That knowledge was like an unscalable wall facing them. He heard a stir of motion at his back, and Sarah Burns pressed close alongside.

"You were gone so long I started to worry," she whispered, and then her eyes found the brush huts. Thorpe felt her stiffen.

"That's the reason," he husked.

"We've still got to have water—" The girl's voice trailed into silence.

And in silence, Thorpe studied the layout below them. Gradually one fact became apparent to him. All of the huts faced away from them. There was little that he knew about these desert Paiutes, but all the red tribes had their own peculiar superstitions. Perhaps facing their hogans toward the rising sun was one native to these savages.

He pointed the fact out to the girl. "Mebbe," he whispered to her, "I can get us some water yet. Less'n they got a night guard posted at the spring, I can slide down this way to fill our bag and make it back without anybody being the wiser."

Sarah's stubborn answer came promptly. "If you go down there, I go with you."

Without taking his seeking gaze from the hogans, Thorpe nodded. The girl might be safer than here on the ridge.

Too, it would save the necessity of making the return climb.

"Walk light," he warned her grimly, "and if you know any prayers start sayin' 'em!"

Yard by slow yard, Thorpe led the way toward the sleeping camp. He could feel the tenseness of the girl beside him, but her nerves were steady enough to keep her from making any unnecessary sound. The murmur of water spilling from its stone-lined hollow within the mesquite grove was audible now. It was music, the finest he'd ever heard.

The deeper blackness of the stunted mesquite trees rose before them. Thorpe pressed into the grove, and he caught the vagrant gleam of starshine on a coppery shoulder.

V

THE Paiute's body twisted, and Thorpe threw himself aside, sweeping the girl along with him. A flung tomahawk whispered its death song where he had been standing.

A single outcry or gunshot would rouse the camp. Thorpe pressed forward toward the stocky warrior, the long barrel of his Navy Colt raking out like a scythe. Starlight gleamed on steel in the hand of the Paiute. The scout parried the stabbing blade with the barrel of his Colt, and let momentum carry the gun on in and up. He heard breath gush from the Indian's mouth as the muzzle of the weapon rose beneath his chin. Thorpe struck again with merciless savagery. In a battle like this it was kill or be killed, and the lives of a hundred emigrants might depend on the accuracy of his blow.

The knowledge put power into his stroke. He felt the blue steel of his Colt bite through coarse hair, and contact bone. Shock ran the length of his arm, numbing his hand, and then the Paiute came tumbling toward him. He caught the brave with arm and upraised knee, and the limpness of the man's body as he slid to the ground told Thorpe that here was a coup he could count if he wanted it.

There would be women wailing in the Paiute camp come morning, and there would be red wolves combing the Salt seeking their revenge. This was the thought in Thorpe's mind as he stared down somberly at the huddled warrior.

He felt Sarah's hand on his arm. "Thorpe," her ragged whisper came to him, "are you hurt?"

"No," the scout told her without turning his head, "but we'll both be Paiute bait by morning or before. That means we've got to keep moving, and moving fast. There's just about one slim chance for us," he couldn't hide the truth from the girl now, "and that is to keep hopin' we'll run into Carrigan's train before the Paiutes spot us. Forget this cuss now. We've got to slake up what water we can, and hope the buckskin I wadded through that hole in our waterbag will hold."

Nothing had ever tasted better to Thorpe than the clear spring water. It was something to remember as they plodded along a Trace that was like a tawny treadmill stretching ever before them. And gradually the thing he had been dreading happened. He watched the deep blue of the night sky start to gray, and then change to salmon pink. Light stole slowly across the Salt, and as it came he saw the girl's feet fail to lift. She stumbled and only the quickness of his move saved her a fall. Arm around her waist he supported her sagging weight.

Sarah raised a face that silent tears had streaked. "Thorpe, I'm done," she said huskily. "I—I can't go on. Leave me—"

Laughter that held no mirth touched Thorpe's lips. "You could have left me before we started," he grunted. "Put your arm around my neck. We're going to make that ridge up ahead. It'll be a right nice place to watch for Paiutes coming from one direction, and Carrigan's train coming from the other."

The eastern sky was filled with full dawn as Thorpe helped the girl up the last slanting rise to the ridge, and as he peered forward across the dun folds of the Salt, his sudden shout made her open eyes that deadening fatigue had closed.

Straight out there before them, dawn light was gilding the stained wagon-tilts of twenty circled Conestogas with golden glory!

"Carrigan!" Sarah Burns cried, "Jim Carrigan. Oh, Thorpe, let's hurry!"

"And I thought you were worn to a frazzle—" he began, but he did not finish

the sentence for the girl's sudden spurt of energy had left her. He saw her tumble forward into the road and lie still.

THAT last five hundred yards, Thorpe carried the girl. Alert guards stationed outside the ring of wagons saw the duo appear out of the morning and blinked their eyes. The man was over six feet, and his fringed buckskins were ragged and torn. Burrs and blood and dirt had matted the mane of brown hair that swept to the fringed collar of his tunic. But it was his face they studied most as he drew near. A battered, bruised face but it was still hard and resolute, and ready to smile.

"This Jim Carrigan's outfit?" Thorpe looked at the bearded guards, and he saw one of them nod.

"Right the fust time," the man drawled, and then he got a glimpse of the girl's white face cradled against Thorpe Daniels' chest. "Glory be to goshen!" the guard exclaimed. "Iffen it ain't Miz Sarah Burns. Here let me take her off your hands. My old woman will know just how to bring her 'round."

His arms were aching, but Thorpe said stiffly, without stopping to analyze his reasons, "I'll carry her. You lead the way." He followed the guard into the enclosure, and the immediate contrast between this wagon train and the Arcane caravan struck him.

Fat cattle instead of gaunt ones were inside a neat rope corral along one curve of the circle. Cheerful children were shouting and romping at their first early morning play. Bustling women were preparing food above individual campfires. Teamsters and wagoners were looking to their harness and ox-yokes. This was a busy, happy camp, quite unlike the gloomy caravan the black-haired Arcane was leading.

And, as though by contrast, Jim Carrigan was himself a blond. Standing almost six-four in his soft leather boots, he was one of the biggest men the scout had ever seen. Above six feet himself, Thorpe looked like a stripling alongside the wagon boss as Carrigan saw the new arrivals and came striding forward.

Others were coming, too, from all sides. It was not often that a caravan received visitors in the middle of the Salt Desert!

The excited gabble of voices seemed to be enough to rouse Sarah from her faint. The scout felt her stir in his arms, and lift her head. "Put me down, Thorpe," she said softly. "I—I can stand now."

Hand on his arm for support, the girl had a smile for Jim Carrigan as he reached them. "Jim," she said simply, "this is Thorpe Daniels. If a better scout ever started for California you'll have to show me!"

Carrigan's sharp blue eyes beneath bushy brows studied them both, and his answering smile was friendly. The hand he extended to Thorpe was like a ham.

Thorpe took it with his left. "The right," he explained, "ain't much good."

"It don't have to be any good," Carrigan laughed boomingly. "Sarah's stamp on you is enough for me, day or night!"

Women with heaped plates of steaming breakfast and mugs of hot coffee were already about them, but hungry as he was, Thorpe waved the food away, and jerked his head at Carrigan.

The captain understood, and followed him a little distance from the group gathered about Sarah Burns. When they were out of earshot, Thorpe paused and waited for the wagon-master to come up to him.

"Carrigan," he said flatly, "I was forced to kill a Paiute last night at a spring up ahead. There's quite an encampment about it, gathering mesquite beans for their winter food, I guess. When they find that buck, there's going to be some hot redskins rompin' back thisaway. My advice to you is to hole up right here until we see if they're willing to attack an outfit this size."

Carrigan's bronze face was handsome in a heavily masculine way. He fingered luxurious burnsides that dropped to the lobe of his ear with a hand that looked as if it had been freshly manicured. It made Thorpe aware of two things. Jim Carrigan was a vain man, jealous of his authority as wagon-master of this Train. He was also a stubborn man, one who would do things his own way, come hell or damnation.

"Your advice is good," Carrigan admitted smoothly, "but we're moving on just the same. I'll see that the cavvy-guard is redoubled, and we'll all keep our eyes peeled for trouble. Days mean too much now to waste a one of them."

THE PAIUTES instead of attacking had vanished by the time the Carrigan train reached the neighborhood of the spring. Their huts had been demolished and even some of their cooking baskets had been left behind in their withdrawal!

Thorpe looked over the wrecked encampment from the back of a white riding mule brought from the cavvy.

"It beats me," he told Carrigan who was astride a black horse big enough to carry his weight. Then his eyes noticed that one of the huts had been burned to charred embers. "Mebbe it doesn't beat me so much at that," he added slowly. "Most reds are a superstitious lot. These Paiutes point all their hogans toward the rising sun. Mebbe they figgered the spirit of the buck I killed last night might get into the hogans, and bring 'em bad luck. They burned one of 'em just to make sure his spirit was gone, wrecked the rest, and skedaddled."

"I take it as a good sign!" Carrigan's lips curled a little disdainfully. "And I'm afraid I'll have to tell Sarah that perhaps her judgment of you wasn't so keen after all. A good scout would have thought of this in advance!"

Thorpe drew a breath, and held his tongue. Together, after a bountiful breakfast, he and Sarah Burns had jointly told Jim Carrigan of their suspicions concerning Bent Arcane, and Carrigan had laughed at their fears.

"Arcane's a vain fool," he proclaimed. "Naturally, he has no love for me, nor I for him. But he isn't the vengeful type. What could he be planning anyway? You say he's ahead of us? All right, that means he has just decided to continue on over Emigrant Gap, instead of risking his party on some untried cut-off. That's sensible. Naturally we'll keep our eyes peeled for trouble, but I think you're both exaggerating."

Thorpe had gone to sleep with a bad taste in his mouth.

And Carrigan's talk now wasn't improving it any. He was unable to keep the hardness out of his agate brown eyes as he stared at the wagon master.

"In a new country," he said deliberately, "a man learns as he goes along, if he's smart. This case ain't much in point. Arcane is the cuss we've got to watch."

The wagons moved on again after barrels banded to their sides were replenished and the stock watered. Outrider for the caravan, Thorpe had time to think as well as eye the desert for Paiutes as the days wore on. And the more he tried to divine the plan for revenge that lay in Bent Arcane's twisted mind the higher grew the wall of mystery. "A few days," Arcane had said. Well, three days had passed, and nothing happened.

Then a cry winging back to him from the long, snake-like procession roused Thorpe from his contemplation. He looked ahead at the caravan, and saw all wagons halted along the line of march. From the rear wagons, men and even women in their wide skirts were running forward to converge on Carrigan's lead Conestoga.

Lips tightening, Thorpe pressed forward wondering at the cause of the excitement. As he passed halted wagons, grinning teamsters yelled the good news to him.

"We've hit the Emigrant Gap turn-off! Hooray, for California!"

VI

THORPE felt the words hit him like a choking fist. The Emigrant Gap turn-off? Here? From the talk he'd heard in the Carson Sink camp the turn-off was many days' drive ahead where the whitened skull of an ox set on a pyre of stone marked the way to California.

Yet, as he neared the group standing a few yards in advance of the lead wagon, Thorpe could see the monument with the ox skull on it.

Sarah Burns was standing beside Carrigan, and she gestured for him to join them. The girl's dark eyes were bright with excitement. Impulsively she linked her hand through his arm, and Thorpe saw Jim Carrigan's lips tighten.

"Thorpe," Sarah cried, "isn't it wonderful? We've reached the turn-off, and every one thought it was days farther on—"

The scout's answer came before he could stifle it. "I still think so!" he said flatly.

Jim Carrigan laughed harshly. "As usual," he drawled, "you're wrong. You've got a pair of eyes in your head. Use them. There is your monument with the ox-skull

on top of it. And I presume you can spell words printed on it. They read, EMIGRANT GAP, TURN-OFF!"

Thorpe was using his eyes on more than that ox-skull. This was not the turn-off! He sensed it, and yet there was nothing definite on which he could put his finger. The pyre of small rocks was neatly stacked. The skull was as it should be. He disengaged his arm from the girl, and silently turned to move along the wheel-marks of the side road, seeking some sign to prove his point.

The flanks of the Sierras had been close these last few days, never more than ten miles from the Trace. Thorpe's eyes rose to the towering peaks seven thousand feet or more above the Salt, but their inscrutable crags couldn't give him the proof he sought.

And yet they were hitting the turn-off too soon. He thought of Arcane and the deviltry that vengeful man had planned. If this was the trick his brain had conceived, every man, woman and child in the Carrigan train might perish in the blind depths of some Sierra box-canyon.

There did appear to be a notch between the folded peaks Thorpe noted and from where he was standing it looked as though a long canyon led up to it. But he had trapped in the massive Rockies, and he knew how easily the appearance of terrain could change on closer approach.

No, there was something wrong here. Yet the ruts of the turn-off road stretched on ahead as far as he could see.

Grimly he turned back to the excited group about the monument, and the very somberness of his lean visage quieted many of the caravan folk. He stopped in front of the wagon master and Sarah Burns.

"Carrigan," he said bluntly, in tones loud enough for all the listening emigrants to hear, "Sarah and I gave you the information we had concerning Arcane and what we knew of the deviltry he planned. I ain't sayin' this is a part of it, but I'm askin' you to hold the train right here until I can scout this turn-off road, and on along the main trail that takes folks to Oregon. I won't be gone more than a couple of days—"

"Days! Days!" Jim Carrigan's impatient voice cut the scout short. "That's all I've heard from you, Daniels. We haven't time to waste on your suspicions. Time is short. We've got to cross the Sierras before snow flies. Even hours count. No, I'll give no such permission as long as I am captain of this train. We roll in ten minutes into the cut-off, and you will oblige me by taking your regular post!"

ON A BORROWED mount, Sarah Burns rode out to the scout's wing position as the shadows of the long canyon closed them in. Her face wore the strained look of worry that had been on it when they had first met.

She came alongside his riding mule, and her hand crossed to touch his arm. "Thorpe," her dark eyes were imploring, "I didn't say anything back at the monument, because I hoped that I might be able to accomplish more by talking to Jim, alone. But I couldn't. He won't listen to me. He just laughs when I mention Bent Arcane. He—he even laughs at you!"

Thorpe shook his head. "Men," he told her grimly, "fall into two classes. There's fools who'll listen and learn. And there's others who have got to butt their heads against a wall. I hate to say it, but I'm thinkin' Carrigan is the second kind. Howsomever, that makes our opinions tally!"

That night the long wings of the deep canyon closed them in on either side. Sweet water was theirs for the taking from a brawling stream that filled the canyon bottom, and wagoners buoyed by hope forgot the day's fatigue, and went out to bring in strings of rainbow and mountain trout to fill the fry-pans of the emigrants.

It was a night for celebration. California lay over the hill! Banjos and guitars made the music for an evening sing. Ordinarily, Thorpe enjoyed such an occasion as much as the rest, but tonight he found it hard to carry a tune.

The Trace led the train onward the next day, along a high, grassy shelf above the white-water creek. Jack pine and yellow pine stippled the slope on their right. Snow brush and sumach added their own glossy green, and to men and women who had seen nothing for a fortnight but the dun desert this was a fragrant paradise. Spirits were high as the day progressed.

As he watched the happiness of everyone else, Thorpe felt his own spirits dropping. The canyon was rising steadily, and

growing narrower by the hour. Ox chains were groaning more frequently as the great beasts in their yokes strained dumb, powerful muscles to obey the shouts of their masters.

Shaking his head, Thorpe pressed his mule on ahead. The canyon narrowed and twisted ahead of him, but as he rounded a great buttress of gray granite the way levelled out ahead. Here at least, Thorpe thought, the oxen and mules would have a chance to rest weary legs. He continued on across the narrow flat. The tracks of the Trace were plain through the meadow grass. Almost too plain, the sudden thought came to Thorpe. It looked as though Conestoga wheels had only recently flattened this grass, and yet there were dim ruts in the earth beneath crushed stems.

"It's got me beat," Thorpe muttered the words aloud. He pressed onward through deep canyon gloom into the gorge beyond the meadow. The shelf he had been following narrowed, and started a still steeper climb. The cliffs were high and sheer now on either side, towering a good hundred feet to pine-crested rims.

Behind him he could hear the caravan creaking into the meadow they had just quit. Carrigan was pushing the wagons, he thought. They were making good time despite the steepness of the road.

Pressing on, he rounded another bend in the narrowing canyon, and then suddenly the gorge straightened like a rifle barrel in front of him. Three hundred yards away lay the end of it.

A cliff, towering sheer for a thousand feet, boxed the end of the canyon! And at the bottom of it stood the skeleton hulks of six weathered Conestogas.

FOR THE SPACE of a minute, surprise held the scout, and the crazy thought came to him that this was what remained of Bent Arcane's caravan. Then he drove his heels into the flanks of the white mule, the true picture of what he was seeing apparent to him at least. The wagons at the end of the box canyon had passed through one winter. Crushed tilts and warped sideboards was proof enough of what the weight of snow had done to them.

Other wagons had been turned around here in this boxed end of the canyon recently. Bent grass held the marks plainly, and at last Thorpe saw the picture clearly. Somehow Arcane had learned that an earlier party of emigrants had taken this wrong turn-off, and left their tracks upon the desert. Cleverly, he had pulled out a half dozen wagons from his own caravan, and brought them into this blind canyon to freshen up tracks already here. Then he had retraced his way to the regular Trace, and moved on ahead to join the rest of his Train. It had cost him two days' time, but the burning vengefulness inside him might make him consider it worth while to force the Carrigan train into this detour.

However, nothing could keep them from turning back, just as Arcane's wagons had done.

The thought was still in his mind when the funnel of the narrow canyon brought sound rolling up to him. It shocked the scout like the report of a giant cannon. A rending, booming roar that seemed to shake the mountains, and after it came a duller, more sustained roar, like the sound of a heavy waterfall. But even that dull portentous rumble was fading into silence as Thorpe got his frightened mule quieted and turned back the way he had come.

He forced the animal to a gallop, but the numb knowledge was spreading through him now that there was no need for hurry. No need at all. They wouldn't be going back to the Salt. No, not a one of Carrigan's twenty wagons with their load of human freight. Black powder, touched off by Bent Arcane, had kicked a thousand tons of granite from the walls of the gorge. Granite enough to block any escape from this box canyon!

It was as bad as he had guessed, Thorpe saw, as the white mule carried him back to the narrow meadow. Dust still drifted lazily upward from ragged monoliths the size of a house. A great, ragged scar lay where the high granite buttress had been before.

And on the rim, a figure made diminutive by distance sat regarding his handiwork. Aboard the saddle on a clean-limbed gelding, Thorpe recognized both Ranger and Bent Arcane.

None of the stunned emigrants in this death canyon had so much as looked up yet to catch their sight of the man who had drawn them into this trap. But that was not Arcane's pleasure. His vengeful

shout came ringing down into the depths of the canyon.

"Let Carrigan laugh his way out of this—" he cried.

The steel of his long rifle cradled across the bows of his saddle felt cold against Thorpe's palms. He lifted the weapon almost without conscious thought as he brought the mule to a halt. Steady in his seat, he swung the rifle to his shoulder, and the sights seemed to line themselves with automatic ease upon the figure on the rim. The wind was bad, and Arcane was beyond decent range, but there was a good charge of powder behind the ball in the barrel of his rifle. Thorpe caught his Ranger horse across the sights, and raised his aim slightly. His finger, as he squeezed the trigger, was cold as the granite that blocked their path of escape.

VII

THE rifle's report rang sharply through the canyon's silence, and Thorpe saw that distant shape on the rim stiffen in Ranger's saddle. Arcane seemed to sway as he wheeled the horse. Then he disappeared into the cloaking blanket of pines that mantled the high slope.

Like the knock of doom on the door, the sound of his rifle seemed to rouse the stunned caravan folk, for as he lowered the weapon slowly, Thorpe heard the shocked shouts of men who had been gay but an hour before. He heard the cries of women, and the sobbing of children.

Sarah Burns, slim and straight as a Paiute arrow in her man's trousers and open-necked shirt, came racing toward him as he paced slowly nearer the disordered train. Thorpe swung down from the mule as the girl neared him, a queer glow of happiness that he could not analyze flowing through his body.

"Thorpe, I think you hit him!" she cried, and her body seemed to seek his as she pressed against him. He felt her tremble, and he wanted to hold her, but instead he pressed the girl back. There were hostile eyes watching them, he could guess, and this was no time to create dissension. He, and Carrigan, and all the rest were going to have to pull together in the same yoke now.

Across the girl's shoulder, Thorpe saw Jim Carrigan break from the huddle of emigrants about the wagons, and stride slowly toward them. Braced for trouble with the wagon boss, he was surprised at Carrigan's appearance as the man stopped before them. His bronzed face had turned gray as the granite barrier blocking them into this death canyon. His blue eyes were clouded with misery.

"Daniels," he said raggedly, "I've been a fool for not listening to you. A damned fool. But I won't be one any longer. I'm turning my authority as train captain over to you!"

Thorpe thought fast for a minute. It took a good man to admit error. If he accepted Carrigan's offer, the blond giant wouldn't be worth a damn from here on in. Carrigan's courage and ready laugh to bolster the morale of other frightened people meant more than anything else right now.

Studying the caravan leader, Thorpe said shortly, "I wouldn't take your command on a platter, mister. You've had guts enough to bring a train close to three thousand miles. Git back there and give those folks a grin. A glum face ain't goin' to get us out of this jackpot. We're in it together, and we'll lick it together. You tell 'em that."

A deep breath stirred the wagon-master's axe-handle-wide chest. He put his hand forward to the scout. "Daniels," he said simply, "you're a better man than me. Mebbe I'll be giving orders to the rest of the company from now on, but I'll be takin' mine from you!"

From the tail end of the caravan nearest the fantastic slide, a voice cried thin and full of fear: "The creek's rising! It's dammed up. We'll drown like rats in here!"

Thorpe felt a grim surge of power vibrate through him. He had felt the secret well of strength open inside his body before when situations had looked hopeless. And none had ever looked more hopeless than this. His eyes were burning brown orbs as he glanced down at Sarah Burns.

"Go tell that fool," he snapped, "that nobody is going to drown! We can pull our wagons into the boxed end of the canyon above the slide line if we have to."

He watched the girl hurry away as Carrigan said somberly, "Daniels, if we're forced to do that not a one of us will ever

leave this canyon alive. The snows aren't far away, and we haven't provisions enough to last out a month."

Thorpe knew that as well as the wagonmaster. The thought of the snows to come was like a weight in his own mind. A memory picture of those pitiful shells of once proud Conestogas at the inner end of this box canyon came before his eyes. That was what the Carrigan train would look like next spring, if winter caught them here.

"There's six wagons at the end of this canyon," he spoke almost to himself, "and they were fools for ever havin' driven that far in. The cliffs back there are a thousand feet high. Here," his brown eyes lifted thoughtfully to the western wall of the gorge, "they ain't over a hundred. There's enough slant to 'em so's a man might climb to the rim."

"But women and children and stock could never make it," Carrigan said hoarsely. "Daniels, with that water rising we've got to do something, and do it quick. If we're pushed back we're lost."

Thorpe nodded. He studied the western escarpment again, then turned his eyes down-canyon. Already the brawling stream had widened perceptibly. By morning or before, this meadow would be awash.

"We've got tonight," he muttered the words to himself, and then his eyes sparked as they found the captain. "Carrigan, God helping us, there's a way we can get out of here—women, wagons, stock and all."

The leader's tense face showed surprise. "How—?"

"Ropes!" Thorpe said. "Every wagon has got rope in it. Light or strong it don't matter. We'll use each for what it'll hold if it's long enough to stretch to the rim Come runnin', mister, this is somethin' for everybody to hear."

Five minutes later, Thorpe was staring into a sea of anxious faces, but he wasn't seeing them. He was seeing the plan for their salvation unfolding in his mind.

"We're going over the rim," he told them crisply. "Arcane can't whip us if every one of you works out the night. There's a job for each. I'm leaving the organizing of crews to you, Carrigan. We'll need men to cut wood for bonfires, and women to keep the blazes going to give us light. Bulldoggers to hogtie oxen and mules. I'll need ten of the toughest on top with me to haul up the wagons and supplies as they're hitched into the slings down here. Some of you get to dismantling the wagons, right now. And some of you women start cookin' up grub. We're going to need hot food and coffee to keep this job going. But we can swing it."

"Swing it or go down fighting!" Carrigan shouted, and his booming, infectious laugh was like a pledge that no man or woman would die here in this boxed canyon of death.

FIRES AT TOP and bottom burned the short night hours away. Logs set to keep ropes from chafing had long since been worn smooth. Pulleys howled as men bent their backs to raise heavy Conestoga wheels, and the bulky boxes of wagons. It was a fantastic task, a red nightmare fought against creeping time. Thorpe found himself everywhere, a thousand details needing his attention. And ever below them, as he peered downward, was the widening black mirror of that rising stream.

The red stars wheeled overhead, and the night wind had a frosty bite as it came sweeping down from timbered heights. Thorpe had ordered each wagon and its load of supplies bunched to simplify the process of assembling them in the morning. Ten were up when rising water snuffed one of the great bonfires lighting the meadow below. Thorpe saw the flames dwindle like a giant candle burning to the end of its wick.

Poised on the rim, he sent his harsh voice winging down to those fighting folk in the meadow. "Abandon the rest of the wagons!" he ordered. "Get up a few more slings of food and clothes. Shoot the stock we haven't saved. Then make ready to ride the slings yourselves!"

Somberly he regarded the death canyon below. In some far-off camp on the true trail to Emigrant Gap, Bent Arcane would be chuckling.

Weary to the point of numbness, Thorpe still could not rest as he saw other dead-tired emigrants sprawl on the brown needles beneath the pines. Not one of the company had been lost. A few had been scratched and bruised on the haul up the cliff, but that was all. Ten wagons had

been abandoned. On the morrow trout would be swimming through their tilts.

One shape stirred beneath the pines. Sarah Burns had seen the lonesome shape of the scout standing beside the heaped coals of one of the bonfires. A blanket in her arms, she came toward him.

"Thorpe," her voice was gentle, "put this around you and lay down. You can't keep going forever—and—and we'll need you more tomorrow than we do now."

Thorpe felt her words drain the last strength from him, and somehow or other, he found himself on the warm earth beside the coals, and the girl's gentle hands were covering him with the blanket. A club over the head could have put him to sleep no more quickly.

Dawn, and its problems, came before the scout realized that he had been asleep. He met Carrigan at the breakfast fire when women prepared a community meal, and drew the captain aside.

"Jim," he said soberly, "we've each got a job. Yours is to get the wagons and company assembled. I'll tackle the job of scouting a route for us. We're too high now to try to backtrack to the Salt. So we've got to push ahead. I've got two ideas on that score. If we cut across country to the West we're bound to hit the Emigrant Gap road sooner or late. That means tough travel, and days, mebbe even weeks of it. Might be we'll hit canyons where we'll have to dismantle and lower the wagons, haul 'em up the other side like we've done here. That takes time."

"And your other plan?" Carrigan asked.

"Just this," Thorpe said bluntly. "A trapper and scout learns to gamble. I'm ready to believe we can climb this ridge to the Gap I spotted yesterday. Won't likely have any canyons to cross, but the going may be rough. When we hit the summit, we'll try and work west to the Emigrant Gap road."

"Either way we're gambling," Jim Carrigan said slowly. "I'll take the big one with you. Start blazin' your trail, mister!"

A COLD WIND that brought its definite threat of winter whipped Thorpe as the white mule, Ginger, carried him upward between the aisle of giant pines. Short axe gripped in his left hand, he made his slow way up the ridge, estimating the distance between trees, seeking the easiest path for the giant Conestogas to follow. For a thousand feet the trail was open. Then a tangle of windfall trees, like a gigantic pile of jack-straws, blocked his progress. Lips set, the scout detoured to the left. Here the slope grew dangerously slant but with ropes caught to wagon boxes and snubbed about trees, the wagons could be held, and inched on forward. For forward they must go with no time spent on roadbuilding, if it could possibly be avoided.

Once, when he broke into a high mountain meadow, he could glimpse the peaks high above the toiling wagons that would be following the blazes he had left on trees. Wreathing those implacable iron crests was a gray scud of clouds. At the sight he clenched his fists. He felt like shaking them at the heights, but that would do no good. Snow was an enemy that man couldn't whip with his fists. Speed was the only thing that would aid them now. Fleetingly, Thorpe thought of Bent Arcane and his gloom caravan, westward on the Emigrant Gap road.

Then he forced his attention back to the task at hand. After that it was twist and turn and climb, blaze trees and climb again. Mid-afternoon came, and the ridge tipped suddenly forward into a level-floored canyon.

"The Gap!" Thorpe spoke the words aloud, and the crying of the wind in the pines on either flank mocked him. It was time to turn back, but he had to see what lay beyond this deep V between the high-flying peaks. The mule was game for the run. Thick meadow grass, Thorpe saw as he rode, would make fine graze for gaunted cattle and mules. For a mile straight between the cloud-wreathed peaks above, he followed the meadow and then the Gap widened as the mountains curved back on either side into a wide plateau. A plateau that stretched westward for as far as he could see.

Thorpe relaxed with a sigh of relief. Arcane had led them into a death trap, but sweat and toil had saved every life, and part of the wagons. Arcane had led them into a death trap, and from his vengefulness had come this pathway to salvation.

THE twinkle of burning campfires led the scout back to the wagon camp, long after chill dark had closed in the mountains.

Joy at the report he had to make to the assembled company supplanted the stunned gloom of the previous day. "I'm not saying it will all be clear sledding," he finished bluntly, "but we've got a good chance of following that plateau until we strike the Emigrant Gap road. I figger it will take us leastways three days more to make it to the pass I found through the peaks. How far we'll have to travel the plateau after that is anybody's guess."

Thorpe made no mention of the snow clouds he had seen wreathing the high peaks. There was no use rousing fear in these people. They had suffered enough already. And happiness and anticipation, he knew, would keep a man going longer than the spur of fear.

Three days, he had judged, it would take them to reach the pass above. Instead it consumed six. Six days that saw another wagon abandoned, when animals grown gaunt from insufficient feed were unable to pull the Conestoga a foot farther.

"We'll use the yoke for replacements," Thorpe told Carrigan. "Mebbe the big fellas will get some meat on their bones without a wagon to pull."

Strain was showing on every one now, and Thorpe saw eyes turn anxious whenever their faces lifted toward the sky. It was the tail of the sixth day when the train leveled into the pass. Cattle so gaunt their bones were almost breaking the skin halted in their tracks and attacked the fresh grass.

Camp was made right there, and spirits climbed that night as someone brought forth a banjo for Sarah Burns to play. "Oh, Susanna," was the popular song, for California was just over the hill!

"Danged if you cain't almost smell that yaller gold out yonder!" one emigrant chuckled.

Aside, where they could converse without interruption, Thorpe talked earnestly to the wagon-master. "The cattle and mules are about done in, Jim. We may not like it, but we've got to lay over here a couple of days, and give them some rest or we may never make the Emigrant Gap road."

Carrigan nodded his blond head. "Yes," the giant agreed. "I had the same thought." Something struck the wagon-master's hand then.

Thorpe saw Carrigan's eyes tip down, and through the gloom he spotted the faintest fleck of white against the other's brown skin. Something cool and feathery brushed his own cheek in the same instant, and then both men looked up to stare long and soberly at each other.

Over at the camp-fire, Thorpe heard voices break abruptly from the song they were singing. "Snow!" someone cried.

MEN AND WOMEN were starting to their feet in something close to panic. The scout's long legs carried him into the firelit circle. "Hold up!" he spoke to them sharply. "There ain't no cause for alarm, if you keep your heads. We've come too far to let a little snow stop us now, but there's things to be done the rest of tonight besides sing. Every pound of weight in the wagons that ain't essential has got to go. That means everything but food and blankets. Cleanin' out the Conestogas is up to you women. As for the rest of us, we got a chore to do. Boys, me'n yore captain figgered to lay over here and fatten the teams for a couple of days. If snow's comin' we can't do it. Yet we got to keep our oxen and mules fed just the same. So get out your knives and start cutting grass. Pack the wagons with every danged ounce they'll hold. Keep our stock strong, and we'll pull through. Starve 'em, and we'll starve, too!"

Cold came with the morning, and the snow was inches deep as protesting oxen broke the wagons into motion again. The white blanket crackled beneath iron-tired wheels, leaving a lacy pattern behind the moving Conestogas.

Cheeks flushed with cold, Sarah rode in the lead with Thorpe to help search out the smoothest path for the wagons to follow. He was glad for her company. There'd been little chance to be alone these last few days, and yet when it came to talking to the girl, he found himself strangely tongue-tied.

"If this chill holds," Thorpe told her a little gruffly, "we won't get any more snow. But if it warms up, look out for trouble."

Sarah nodded. Her lips were chapped but she could still smile. Then the smile faded. "I keep thinking of mother," she murmured, "and all the rest of them. I wonder where they are now? Has the snow been worse farther west? Or have they managed to beat it over the hump? I—I suppose we'll never know until we reach the lowlands and Hangtown."

"There's just one thing certain," Thorpe told her grimly, "Arcane will get them over the hump if he can. He's had his revenge. He figgers us for goners. So you can bet your dollar that he'll pull his own outfit through if he can."

"We—we might even meet on the road down," Sarah said.

Thorpe gave her a cool, straight glance. "I would like nothing better," he told her quietly.

For three days as they rolled slowly west along the plateau the cold held while clouds kept massing in the sky. Their grayness was like an oppressive weight and desperation was driving them all now.

Thorpe offered to go on ahead to try to cut the Gap road, but Jim Carrigan vetoed the plan. "We lose you, Daniels, and none of us will make it. If a storm breaks while you're gone, you'd never find your way back. No, we've got to hang and rattle together, mister!"

The fourth day dawned, and the air had a softer, warmer feel against the scout's cheek as he and Carrigan saw the wagons lined out behind their advance.

A sudden thought came to Thorpe. "Hitch ropes from tongue to tailgate of each wagon," he suggested, "and another line from yore lead wagon to the cantles of our saddles. "We'll keep pushin' on, snow or no damned snow, and we won't need to worry about wagons gettin' lost or out of line."

The first flurry hit them before the job was finished. Looking across his shoulder through the falling flakes. Thorpe watched men and even women struggling to string ropes between the wagons as they kept moving. By the time Carrigan was back beside him with lines to hitch to their own saddles, even the lead wagon fifty feet behind them was nothing but a dim blur.

Through the muffler wrapped about his face. Carrigan howled, "Here it is, Daniels!"

Thorpe nodded without trying to speak. No words were needed. Each of them knew that if they didn't reach the descending Gap road before the day was out, they would never make it. Five feet of snow would blanket this plateau by morning, and weary oxen could not smash their way through drifts that high.

Only the lines strung between the wagons were keeping some from straying now, Thorpe knew, as he and Carrigan paced blindly forward into the teeth of the blizzard. The feel of wind and snow against his face guided Thorpe. For an hour, he kept the gusts coming from a quartering direction, and that meant he was still headed in a straight line forward.

The mule stumbled beneath him, then tipped forward. They were at the head of a sharp declivity. Pines reared like white ghosts on either side suddenly, and Thorpe gritted his teeth at a nod from Carrigan and let the wagons come on.

A man couldn't tell what lay at the bottom of this slope. Perhaps a canyon, bottomless for a thousand feet. And perhaps —it was a grim guess—the Gap road they sought might lie just ahead.

As though his thoughts had conjured a picture, Thorpe saw something loom out of the driving curtain ahead. It looked like the high, ghostly tilt of a prairie schooner, and then it was gone in the scud. But another seemed to take its place, and he knew that he couldn't be mistaken a second time for they were close enough now for sound to reach them. Flying toward them on the howling blizzard wind, Thorpe heard the rattle of ox-chains, the groaning of loose fellowes in wagon wheels—

Mittened hand brushing back to his hip, he got his knife from beneath the heavy coat an emigrant had loaned him. He slashed the rope binding him to the lead wagon behind them, and plunged ahead.

He heard Carrigan cry something that sounded like "Arcane."

ARCANE? Yes, this could be Arcane's caravan traveling the Emigrant Road. Breath suddenly hot in his chest, Thorpe dropped the mule into the roadway. Navy Colt in hand, he swung the animal's head up-hill as another Conestoga lurched into view.

Lifting his gun, he fired a single shot into the sky, for it was about the only sound a half-blinded driver would hear and comprehend. He saw plodding mules halt as the reinsman on the box drew in. Thorpe pressed alongside the wagon. "Hold 'er," he shouted against the force of the wind. "There's an outfit comin' in from the side—"

"And who might be their captain?" He heard the question thinly through the crying of the wind.

"Jim Carrigan," Thorpe answered the driver.

"Glory be!" The shout that answered him was louder. "You couldn't name a better man to me nor plenty of the rest. Bent Arcane's been spreadin' it around for the last week that Carrigan's outfit wouldn't be seein' Californy this year—"

"Mebbe," Thorpe didn't speak the words very loudly but they seemed to carry to the driver above him, "Arcane is the one who won't be seeing the Sacramento."

"If you're that pilgrim he tromped, I'll lay my bets on you. Sarah Burns musta found ye, and together yuh tied in with Carrigan. Her mother will be mighty glad to hear that."

"We did," Thorpe said. "Where's Arcane?"

"Up ahead," the driver chuckled. "I'll hold the rest back till your caravan sandwiches intuh line, if you want to make a ride."

Thorpe turned the mule without more words, and the wind at his back seemed to blow him forward. He thought fleetingly of Sarah Burns and Jim Carrigan. The captain had turned into a mighty decent man. He'd have plenty to offer an Argonaut girl, beside the dream of a rancho looking out to the sea. And the caravan itself was safe now. On this downhill grade they could bull through drifts that would halt a wagon on the level. Yes, the combined trains could make the lowlands now, even through the howling scud of blizzard snow.

He was thinking about that when a tall, muffled shape on a bay horse that had clean, familiar lines loomed out of the whiteness before him. He recognized Ranger before he identified its rider.

Then Bent Arcane's imperious voice came at him. "What in damnation is holding up the rear wagons?"

"I am," Thorpe said the words quietly, and his face was recognizable as the muffler slipped down to his throat.

Arcane's eyes through their rime of frost were startled, but the man was quick to recover. With a movement swift as the strike of a snake, he flipped a long knife from the sleeve of his big coat. Thorpe saw the glint of it, and heard the man's howled words. "I didn't finish my job once. I will this time!"

Without mercy or regret, Thorpe triggered the Colt in his left hand. Arcane had been full of treachery from the beginning. He would never change. Thorpe saw his lead catch the man full in the chest, and the knife half-back for throwing never left the caravan leader's hand. The scout watched the blade drop from opening fingers, and then Arcane's body was slumping across Ranger's saddle.

Thorpe swung forward to steady the man, and he knew that the limp shape under his hand was dead even as he touched him. The somber thought came to the scout that morning would find another unmarked and lonesome grave on the road to California.

They buried Bent Arcane that night, below the white belt where the blizzard still howled, and Jim Carrigan pronounced the last somber ritual.

"Dust thou art, to dust returneth—Friends," he added soberly, "I cannot find it in my heart to say more, either for, or against, this man."

Thorpe was conscious of Sarah beside him, and he felt the quick tension of her fingers against his palm as Carrigan finished speaking. "Let's walk," she whispered.

And Thorpe with shy diffidence asked a question that had to be answered before they reached the Sacramento. "Mebbe you'd rather wait for Jim?"

Sarah Burns' eyes lifted to the scout's sober face. "You may," she said acidly, "know a lot about traps and mountains, but you don't know much about women!"

Thorpe walked with the Argonaut girl, and he knew in his heart that he had found the thing he wanted these long wandering years—

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THE EDITOR.

LONE BANDIT

By JOHN VERNON DALEY

HENRY STARR, leader of the notorious band of outlaws that operated along the Kansas and Indian Territory border in the year of 1889, lay wounded at his ranch over by the Cherokee Indian reservation.

I, also a member of the gang, slightly wounded, and badly wanted, was in hiding at the town of Muskogee, Indian Territory.

One day, I received word from Henry asking me to see him first chance I got. Two days later, disguised as an Indian, I rode down the familiar lane that led to his large ranch house. Dismounting, and with my cane to aid me, I hobbled across the lawn to the great iron-studded door, rapped on it with my cane and waited expectantly.

The door was opened by his housekeeper, a half-breed Indian squaw, called the Black Pearl. At first glance she failed to recognize me, but when I spoke to her, she bade me welcome. Anticipating my inquiry for Henry, she told me he was in his room asleep, that, at her request, the doctor from the reservation had come over, and after dressing his wound, had given him a sleeping potion.

Henry, she told me, was not in a serious condition, but had taken no care of himself, having been on the go constantly, trying to straighten out his affairs. A slight infection of the bullet wound in his side had sent him to bed. The doctor said he needed rest.

Henry was known to be a close friend of

Cherokee Bill, killed in a recent train robbery. It was known too that Henry had had business relations with Dick Dine and Eddie Estelle, who was arrested for the crime, and was under suspicion by the United States Marshal's office for complicity in the affair.

Pearl, who was raised by the Starrs, and loyal to the core, said: "They can't get anything on him! No one dares to testify against him! The whole Cherokee Nation is worked up over the killing of Bill. They are all Henry's friends! So is the Indian Agent! He told the marshal to take it easy, and not to start nothing. And I am telling you, that if they try to arrest Henry Starr, there is going to be plenty killings! Do you know what they are trying to do? Trying to break Henry's lease. And that crooked banker at Cherryvale won't advance him any more money."

I had found out that if Henry failed to have twelve thousand dollars to pay the Indian Agent for an extension of his lease, in a month's time, they were going to eject him from his vast holdings.

I went up to his room quietly and stood at the foot of his bed with my eyes resting on him in sober thought. This man was my loyal friend. He had saved my life on two occasions, at the risk of his own. It was now up to me to show my friendship and worth, other than in words. Fearful that I might awaken him, I slipped away. Pearl was making up my room, and I told her I had business that would take me away for a few days, and for her to tell Henry that I would have good news for him on my return.

I had thought of a way to help him; a desperate plan! But dangers, and hardships hadn't daunted me, and the bullet wound in my hip made me only slightly lame. Maybe it was a foolish thing to do, but under the circumstances I didn't think so. My friend was sick and in trouble, and I wouldn't let risk to my skin stand in my way of helping him.

OUT at the corral, I roped and threw the saddle on a big roan mare, mounted and headed for Cherryvale, Kansas. I had ninety miles of wild, unknown, and heavily timbered country before me, with renegade Indian gunmen, as well as lawmen, seeking my life. But my mind was made up, there would be no turning back now.

Mile after mile of new territory drifted behind the flying hoofs of my big mare. The going so far was good; I was following a wide cattle trail. There was no necessity for haste, and when I concluded I had covered one third of the distance, I found a likely spot and made camp. After I had watered and staked the roan in a grassy spot, I built a fire between two logs; as it was September, and the nights were beginning to grow cold.

I had only a handful of parched corn, and a few pieces of jerk in my saddle bags, as I had made no preparation for this journey. The decision to rob the Bank of Cherryvale was made on the spur of the moment.

After eating my food, I spent some time around the fire. Finally growing sleepy, I went back a short distance in the brush and raked a pile of leaves together for a bed, and went instantly to sleep.

I slept soundly, but with that hair-trigger lightness of a man to whom danger is no stranger. Suddenly I snapped awake, and lay tensely alert, hand gripping my gunbutt. It was early morning. The smell of pine was in the crisp air. My ears still rang with a slight sound. It was still dark. That darkness that comes before dawn. The fire was still smoldering, and by its dim light, I saw a man limp into sight carrying a rifle.

He was dressed in buckskins, and his long iron gray beard matched his hair, that hung to his shoulders. Although I could see that he knew my gun covered him, he came toward me with confidence. "Don't get scared, sonny," he said. "Old Gable ain't going to hurt you."

Without another word he started cooking on the fire, boiling coffee, and frying bacon and baking hot cakes.

I was only eighteen years of age, and the smell of the fragrant coffee and frying bacon whiffed to me on that crisp air was overwhelming.

Having finished his cooking, he said: "Don't be backwards, sonny, toddle up and help yourself. If you had lived as long as I have in the Indian country, you would know that I am not curious, or inquisitive. You are welcome, sonny. Come on up."

Instinctively, I liked that old bearded man, and could see no harm in him, so I accepted his invitation and stepped over to the fire. He handed me a can of coffee, and invited me to help myself to the hot cakes and bacon. As I stooped and reached for them with my free hand, he kicked the fire and ashes into my face. I was but a moment off guard, but his action was swift. In a flashing blur of motion, his hand swooped to his holster and came up blasting. One bullet burned a red smear along my cheek, while the other nipped the collar of my jacket.

I should have killed him. But I pulled off, and shot him high in the shoulder. Dazed, he staggered backwards, tripped and fell. He was a wretched coward, groveling, and begging for his life. It was but a slight wound. I ripped open his jacket and staunched the blood.

I didn't ask him why he tried to kill me, but he told me. His name was Gable. He had been to Cherryvale for supplies, and had seen the posters giving a good description of me, and offering the large reward for my apprehension, or death. When I limped toward the fire, and came close enough for him to see my blue eyes, he recognized me in spite of my disguise.

He was the type of outlaw that was hated above all others in the Territory, selling guns, ammunition and whiskey to the Indians.

After bandaging his wound, I followed him to where he had his outfit. After a few grunts and groans, he mounted his swayback sorrel mare, and taking the lead-line of his pack mule, was off without the customary farewell.

Overanxious to be on his way, he forgot to take his cooking utensils and food, and, although greatly worried, I made a hearty meal. His treacherous attempt on my life, coupled with the fact that he had recognized me so readily, made my task doubly hard. Besides, I knew that this part of the Territory was infested by bounty-hunting outlaws, and Indians.

The sun was peeping above the tree tops when I mounted and sped swiftly along the trail, straining my eyes and ears to hear or see the unusual. Hills covered with a dense growth of timber and undergrowth, canyons so choked with brush and tangled drift that their bottoms never saw sunlight, were before me. The only sound that reached my ear was the slight jingle of the gear on the impatient roan.

Hours passed. The afternoon shadows lengthened. Near the Border were a few open spaces. These I crossed with misgivings. The big roan had flung miles behind her seemingly without effort.

The sun was low in the west when I approached the small clearing surrounded with cottonwood trees, in which the town of Cherryvale was hidden. Deciding that boldness was the best method, I rode down the main street.

I CAME to the feed-lot. Dismounting, I led the roan in and requested the Indian in charge to give her water, grain, and a rubdown.

The town was quiet as I made my way up the street to the nearest saloon. Only a few saddle horses and a couple of wagons showed in the street, and not more than a half a dozen men were in sight. My entrance was opportune, as I was the only customer. The bartender was a Cherokee Indian, and I spoke to him in the dialect. "How about a drink of whiskey?" I asked him. Placing a bottle and glass on the bar, he said: "Help yourself, kid. You're white and twenty-one, or I am blind."

I was startled, but his broad wink assured me. As no customers arrived I bought several drinks, and at my request he joined me. I told him I had some urgent business to transact with the banker, but as I had arrived after banking hours it would be necessary for me to locate his residence, and asked him for information as to its whereabouts. He told me that the banker was out of town, but that his brother, who was the cashier, and lived with him, would no doubt be able to serve me. Beckoning me, he went to the door and pointed to a house several doors from the bank, and said that it was the banker's residence. After buying a final drink, I bade him good night and left.

Back again on the street, I found that the town had begun to come to life. Horses were hitched along the rails, and several men were standing in front of the saloon across the way. My entrance to the town had been timely! I had met with far more success than I had dared hope for!

Having no further business to detain

me, I headed for the feed-lot; keeping in the shadows. Reaching it, I led out the roan, mounted and headed out of town. About a mile from town I found a place, some yards off the trail, where the brush was thick enough to conceal the roan. Dismounting, I removed both saddle and bridle, and staked her out.

My unfamiliarity with the trails in that thickly wooded part of the Territory, which I would be compelled to travel, caused me to postpone robbing the bank until the early hours of morning. It was barely twelve miles to the Border, and I was banking my chances on the swiftness and endurance of my mount. I had little fear of being pursued across the Line by a posse. There was small chance of them trying to explore the gloomy canyons and thickly wooded hills. Daring lawmen, and greedy grasping reward seekers, had been known to enter on the trail of badly wanted fugitives — and never return. Others had returned, tied to their saddles, dead.

I figured that I had about five hours to wait, so I found a nook and stretched out to take a nap. I wasn't going to spend it worrying about something ahead!

Two hours before dawn, I saddled the roan, and headed back to Cherryvale. When I arrived I found the streets empty. The town slumbered! Tying the roan to a large cottonwood tree in front of the bank, I strolled down the street to the banker's house, and knocked loudly on the door.

The man who opened it had apparently been in haste, as he was pulling his trousers on over his nightshirt. When he started asking me my business, I shouldered in without ceremony. He took a step backwards, and his face went ashen. "What—is—the—meaning—of—this?" he stammered.

Pressing my gun against his breast, I told him: "Not another word out of you, fellow." Grasping him by the arm, I pulled him through the doorway, and gently closed the door.

He seemed to know what it was all about, as he headed for the bank without being told. He unlocked the bank door, and stepped hastily within. The watchman, on whom he may have depended, and who slept on a bunk in the rear of the bank, sat up sleepily, rubbing his eyes. Catching sight of the gun in my hand, his hand slid under the pillow and came out furtively grasping a gun. I fired instantly, and it disappeared from his hand. He sat staring with stupefaction at his bleeding fingers.

Afraid that my shot would attract attention, I prodded the horror-stricken cashier with the still smoking gun, and demanded that he open the safe, quickly, if he wished to live.

He was trembling to the extent he could hardly grasp the knob. However, he opened it readily. I pitched him the saddlebags, and told him to fill them with paper money, only.

The watchman still sat on the bunk nursing his wounded hand, and the cashier was hastily stuffing the saddlebags with currency, when I heard, faint and far away, the sound of running feet. Snatching the bags from the cashier, I backed to the door; keeping them both covered. Opening it, I ran swiftly across the walk to where I had tied the roan, quickly unhitched her, and mounted.

I was not a moment too soon, as I was quickly surrounded by a bunch of townmen, who stood gaping, staring in amazement.

Then one of them, a hawkish-faced fellow with a crooked gash of a mouth, pushed himself to the front and stood glowering. I felt his challenge; his belligerence. A hush of expectancy fell over the crowd. I was tensed for action, but wholly unprepared for what followed.

SHOOTING from his hip, he fired point-blank at me without warning. The bullet cut my hat brim. But, before he could fire again, I sent three bullets thudding into his body. As he fell, I emptied my gun over the startled crowd, and wheeling my mount and uttering the shrill Cherokee cry of victory, dashed back toward the Territory.

The townies, recovering from their confusion, sent several badly aimed bullets in my direction. But the big roan was covering the ground with mighty leaps. Reaching the heavy timber and underbrush, she plunged through without faltering.

I could see no trail, as it was still dark. Owing to the swiftness of my noble roan,

and luck at the bank, I had made far greater speed than I had reckoned. I wasn't worried, as I knew the general direction of the Cherokee reservation. I headed her in that direction and gave her a slack rein, to allow her to pick her way around the close standing trees.

Coming into a small clearing, I halted her, dismounted and eagerly looked over my haul. The stamped parcels were easily counted. I had robbed the Cattleman's Bank of Cherryvale of twenty-two thousand dollars, a far greater sum than I had reckoned. I was jubilant; not for myself, but due to the fact that my friend wouldn't have to give up his holdings for the want of ready cash.

All that day I traveled slowly through the dense timber. I was searching for the cattle trail; so far, without success. How far I had traveled toward my destination, I had no idea. When darkness came it began to rain. Thunder rolled heavily against the cliffs, and rolled down into the valley and black canyons. When it was too dark to travel further, I found a declivity leading into a canyon, and in its desolate seclusion spent a quiet night.

Next morning when light enough to travel, I saddled the roan, mounted and searched for the slope where I had entered. When I located it, and ascended to the rim, I saw a log cabin not over a hundred yards distance away. Smoke was ascending from the chimney. Anticipating a hot meal, and information about the cattle trail, I dismounted and tied up the roan, and approached it cautiously. But when I saw nothing to cause alarm, I stepped boldly into the clearing, and hailed. When I received no reply to my repeated hailings, I approached the cabin, and knocked loudly on the door with the butt of my carbine. Shuffling feet sounded when I repeated my summons. The inside bar was removed, and the door cautiously opened.

The man who faced me in the doorway was a 'breed, dressed in buckskins. He was drunk, and held a rifle loosely in his hand. "Easy with that rifle, fellow," I said to him in the Cherokee dialect.

In his drunken condition, he mistook me for an Indian and addressed me in the same dialect. But, as he was a Chickapee breed, he spoke the words poorly. I thought he was asking me to have a drink.

As he said nothing further, but stood staring at me in a hostile manner, I became suspicious of him, and was about to demand the hospitality he should have accorded me without request. I placed my hand on my gunbutt, and was about to speak when I felt the hard muzzle of a gun jab me in the back, and a voice that sounded like the friction of a file on steel, that said: "This is the hydrophobia skunk I was telling you about, Dick. Step aside. I am going to blow him apart."

With my hand already on my gunbutt in swivel holster, I instantly tipped it backwards, and thumbed the hammer with the rapidity gained from long practice. Although my shooting was done blindly, it was deadly accurate. When I heard him fall, I stepped aside, still keeping the breed covered.

When I had shot his partner, I saw him tense. His hand stole toward the hammer of his gun. I thought for a moment that I would be compelled to kill him, also. I commanded him to drop his rifle. He not only dropped it, but unbuckled his belt, and let his guns drop.

Then I looked at the man I had shot, and was not greatly surprised to find that he was Gable, the peddler. A great blotch of blood covered his jacket on his left breast. His moaning had ceased. And even as I looked at him, his breath left him in a slow gasp.

Entering the cabin, I commanded the breed to prepare my breakfast. And while he was doing so, I questioned him about the cattle trail. He told me that the trail was only a short distance from the cabin.

After eating I took him with me to where I had tied the roan, and demanded that he show me the trail. When we reached it, I unloaded his guns, and gave them to him. After cautioning him not to follow me, I galloped swiftly down the trail; glancing back occasionally to see if I were followed.

I gave the roan a loose rein, and allowed her to travel in leisurely fashion, while I scanned the brush for a likely place to make camp.

Suddenly the roan changed her direction, and headed in a southerly direction along a narrow trail. Then, straight ahead through the thick foliage, I spied the light

of a fire, and heard the terrified bawl of a frightened steer being seared by a hot iron.

Dismounting, I removed my spurs, and worked my way through the thick brush with difficulty. When about a hundred yards from where I had left my mount, I made out a large log corral filled with cattle, and by the dim light of a small fire, I could see several human figures. It was too dark to judge accurately, but one of them who sat humped in the saddle of a large horse looked like Henry Starr.

My mind was wholly obsessed with the spectacle before me, when a voice spoke to me from the brush. "Steady, kid," it warned. "Keep your hand away from your gun."

Then, straight in front of me, and not over ten feet distance away, the brush parted and a man stepped forth with a gun pointed directly at me. He walked up to within a yard of me, and stood grinning; but the set of his jaw and the look in his eyes boded me no good.

I stood tensed, with feet well braced, ready to take advantage of the first opportunity he gave me. The situation looked hopeless. He held his gun with confidence.

He spoke roughly. "What in the hell are you up to, Indian, prowling, and snooping around here at this time of the night?"

I had forgotten my stained face. He thought I was an Indian. It was better luck than I had expected. I wasn't going to enlighten him, and when I answered I did so in the Cherokee dialect, asking if he were a law officer. He shook his head, giving me to understand that he understood none of the dialect. I then mixed a few words of English with Cherokee, and told him I had a message for Henry Starr. He was startled, and looked at me searchingly, and inquired, "Then why are you sneaking around over here in the brush? Henry's ranch is over by the Cherokee reservation."

Mumbling a few words of Cherokee, I pointed towards the corral. He made the mistake of turning to see what I was pointing at. He was quick to realize his mistake, and whirled quickly, but only in time to look in the muzzle of my guns.

"Don't move! Drop your gun, fellow!" I snapped at him.

He was so mad that he had allowed himself to be tricked that he hesitated, and stood staring at me with bleak, murderous eyes. But when I repeated my command, he dropped his rifle, and when I had stripped him of his short guns, I asked him: "Who are your friends that are doing the branding?"

"Go to hell!" he shouted, and cursed me for a full minute.

"I have a message for Henry Starr," I told him, "and if that isn't him over at the corral, I will have to take you with me to his ranch."

He thought this over for a moment, and said nastily, "If you want to see Henry, he's over at the corral. But damn you to hell, if you are lying to me."

"If it isn't Henry, and you are leading me into a trap," I told him earnestly, "you had better start saying your prayers now." We started to walk.

COMING within a short distance of the corrals, my eyes made a quick survey of the place. At the far corner of the big double corral two white men sat their mounts, surrounded by a dozen Indians. In the corral, close at hand, Henry Starr was mounted on his big gray studhorse, and surrounded by a full score of Indians, squatting on their haunches around a small fire, and talking in guttural tones. When one of the Indians called his attention to us, Henry left the corral, and rode forward. When he recognized me and the man I was bringing in on the point of my gun, he laughed outright. Recovering, he extended his hand, and said: "Glad to see you, Johnny. I see you know your way around."

Grasping his hand, I told him: "Glad to see you around, too, Chief."

"Well, Johnny," he remarked, "I see that the man you brought in has sneaked, and if you have nothing to detain you we will be on our way."

We rode along in silence. Henry drooped in his saddle, seemed in deep meditation. Presently, he spoke in a slightly worried tone, "Johnny, I let that fine bunch of steers go for ten dollars a head! Stealing cattle isn't very profitable at that price!"

When we reached the home corral, which we did shortly, as the distance was only five miles, Henry remarked in a joshing tone, "Come, give an account of yourself,

youngster. You come barging into one of my strongest cattle hideouts, bringing my lookout in on the point of your gun. What have you been up to since you visited me?"

Tossing him the saddlebags, which I was carrying across my arm, I told him proudly: "I had a little job in view, Chief, and, not seeing any of the gang around, I did it myself."

Looking into the bags he saw the packages of currency, and inquired, "How much, and from where?—if it is a fair question."

I told him that I had robbed the bank at Cherryvale, Kansas, of twenty-two thousand dollars. He seemed surprised, and inquired, "Did I understand you to say you robbed the Cattleman's Bank of Cherryvale?"

When I informed him that he had not misunderstood me, he looked at me with eyes that danced with laughter, and I heard him mumble, "And he brought the old wolf's cub in on the point of his gun, too."

He questioned me no further, but remarked, "You must be hungry, Johnny. Let's see what Pearl has ready for us."

When we entered the house, the food was on the table, waiting. Pearl had been informed by the Indians of our coming, long before our arrival.

Seated in the sittingroom, after a hearty meal, I told Henry of my adventure. How I was compelled to kill the townsman, and peddler.

Henry made no comments, but inquired, "What do you intend to do with the money?"

I told him that my sole object in robbing the bank was to obtain money for him to pay for an extension of his holdings.

"That is mighty fine of you," he said sincerely, "but I can't accept your money as a gift. I am having a tough time lately, and need money badly, so will make you a proposition. My horse herd numbers over three hundred head. I will give you a bill of sale on the half of them, for fifteen thousand dollars."

Knowing how justly proud Henry was of his fine horse herd, and glad to have him accept the money under any conditions, I gladly accepted.

Henry looked drawn, haggard and heavy-eyed as he sat counting out the money. "I want you to know, Johnny," he said, "that I sure appreciate having this money, and the source it came from gives me more pleasure. Did you happen to notice two men seated on their horses at the other end of the corrals? They were Tom Morrow and his partner Bill Doolin! Tom and Bill came into the Territory several years ago: supposedly from the Hole-in-the-Wall country in Wyoming. Tom was run out of the Territory for rustling. He located in Cherryvale, is now wealthy —and owns the bank that you robbed! And the youngster you disarmed is the son of the man you compelled to open the safe and give you the money!"

Henry laughed long and loud, and remarked: "Johnny, that old owlhoot and his partner worked me and my Indians from dawn until shortly before you arrived, re-branding those cattle, and then taking advantage of the fact that he knew I was in desperate need of ready cash, paid me only ten dollars a head for them."

I told him that the bartender and cashier could give a good description of me, and that the cashier's son would no doubt be able to recognize me and tell them of my whereabouts.

Henry said: "You need have no fear of the Federal authorities taking action, as the crime was committed outside their jurisdiction, and besides, they know Morrow and Bill both to be outlaws. But if Tom learns that it was you that robbed his bank, he will send some of his gunmen or Kiowa Indians into the Territory to kill you."

I told him Morrow had better get busy, as I was leaving immediately for New Mexico. I had arrived at that conclusion, while camped in the canyon. Henry Starr, whom I esteemed above all men I had met in the Territory, was taking desperate chances by giving me shelter, as he was seriously suspected himself.

So against his urgent plea that I make his house my home, I bid him goodbye and left for Muskogee.

The next day I started on my journey, following that broad trail along the Cherokee Strip leading to that sanctuary for badly wanted men: the canyon country, among the bloody Apache Indians in New Mexico.

Captain Tomahawk

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

Tal Hastings voyaged alone to the rendezvous on the Bighorn. He paddled with his life in pawn, for an unseen force stalked that strange wild company of trappers, the free-trade legion.

CAPTAIN TOMAHAWK

A Novel of the Fur Frontier

A DOZEN FIRES burned in the timber-ringed swale back of the river. Along the bank, a motley assortment of canoes, pirogues and bateaux lay in the grass. Here and there were heaps of roughly baled furs—prime plew from the high valleys of the northland. And among these things, spending idle talk and rough humor like sailors ashore spending money, moved the free-trade legion. Old Williams, Abel Stone, Renard, Celestine, Pere Satane—Yankees, Canuks, 'breeds, and a few renegade Indians, ousted from their tribes on one pretext or another. A strange, wild company of men, living beyond the fringe of a frontier moving ever more swiftly, now, into the west.

They came from the Milk River, the Platte, the Green and the Snake. They brought their furs in to the rendezvous on the Bighorn. Here they uncovered the buried keg of whiskey and began their wait.

At the center of the shapeless camp, a big-bodied, great-bellied man sat near the whiskey-barrel, doling out its contents. His little eyes under shaggy, protruding brows, ran paternally over the rendezvous. Carcajou Shane had been the first trapper into the north country. Always his was the biggest catch. And it was he who named the meeting place for rendezvous the following year. It was his pride that he had fathered the legion. And his greatest pleasure was presiding over the whiskey-barrel at rendezvous while the gay, reckless freemen did their trading and had their fun.

This year, however, uneasiness sat with Carcajou, even in the tumult of raucous laughter and rough bandinage. Some of the brotherhood would never come in to the Bighorn. They lay already forgotten along some outland trail, their furs gone. Always hated by the trading companies who wanted all men under contract, the free-trade was accustomed to occasional quarrels. But not to an unseen force which stalked every stream in the north, striking swiftly and from behind. Shane's uneasiness was that reasonless crawling of nerves which presages war and his eyes were restless with it.

Thus, when the tall stranger swung out of the dark river and beached his canoe in front of the fires, Carcajou swung his hand in an unmistakable order. Celestine and the renegade Blackfoot, Blue Wolf, were among the boats of the legion. Moving soundlessly, they came up behind the stranger as he straightened from mooring his canoe, and caught his elbows. It was neat and quick and sure. Shane grinned to himself. Without leadership, without orders or organization, how smoothly the men of the legion worked! What an army they would make if there ever was need!

THE stranger stabbed quick looks at the men on either side of him, but made no defensive move as Celestine and Blue Wolf started him through the fires. Chaffing remarks were flung at him as he moved.

"Celestine's slippin'. Down to huntin' two-legged mushrats off'n the river!"

"Big mushrat, though. Big enough to give Blue Wolf a fust-class wrassle!"

"Like enough a damn spy prowlin' up from the Yankee Company's post at Fort National. Let's give him a touch o' fire an' send him back down the river bellerin' to his boss!"

The stranger grinned faintly but made no answer. His two captors brought him on to stand in front of Carcajou. Shane eyed the man carefully. The boys were right. He was almost as big as the huge Blackfoot, but trimmed down neater. He had level, frosty blue eyes and cedar-colored hair that curled at his shoulders. His rig showed signs of wear and travel, but the hilt of the Green River knife and the pistol in his belt were well-kept. When Celestine and Blue Wolf stopped in front of Shane, the stranger spoke.

"You the boss of this shebang?"

Carcajou shook his head. "Ain't no boss in this camp, son," he said. "This is a free-trade rendezvous and the man that could boss it ain't been born!"

The stranger pushed back his tattered, flat-crowned hat, his eyes warming.

"Then I reckon this's the place I been looking for!" He chuckled. "Gents, you're looking at a jigger that's got a bellyfull of other folks' meddlin' and a plain unreasonable hankering to paddle his own canoe. Name's Tal Hastings. Comin' all the way up from Leavenworth, I been cutting for sign of a partner that was cut from the same cloth as me. And from what I hear, I figgered on findin' him here. A *loup-garou* called Carcajou Shane!"

Shane let the sombreness slide from his face. When a man's been in the north country a dozen years, it makes a warm place in him to find out his name travels as far down-river as Forth Leavenworth. And beside this, the newcomer had a reckless, challenging light in his eyes which sat well with Carcajou Shane. The years were creeping up on him and the fire of a younger man might keep lonely camps warm. Until this minute, Shane had never thought of taking on a partner. But the idea suddenly struck home. He grinned, nodded at the two who held the tall man's elbows, and stuck out his hand.

"I'm Shane," he said shortly. "Sit down, Hastings. Got to forgive us if we met you with a mite of an edge. Old McFairn, up at Fort Benedict, agreed last fall to meet this rendezvous and take our furs off'n our hands. He's six days overdue, right now. And there's plenty hell loose in this green country this season. We're some rooty till McFairn shows!"

Hastings straddled a log and dragged a short, stem-bitten pipe from his pocket. His eyes ran appreciatively over the stacked furs which represented the season's free-trade catch across the whole of the north.

"McFairn—Anglican man, isn't he? Seems I've heard of him. An' the hearing was all bad. You boys aiming to out-fox a fox?"

Shane shrugged. "Grizzly's more like it when you're talkin' of Red John McFairn," he said. "But damn mangy company men, they've tied our heads up, neat. Only one other post in the territory—Ab Moline's Fort National. And Moline won't take our trade. Either you got a contract with his Yankee Fur Company or you're open game to every rifle out of Fort National and to hell with your furs! We're playin' trades with a striped-backed skunk when we deal with McFairn. But it's either that or haul our furs ourselves eighteen hundred miles down to St. Joe. Ain't much choice!"

Hastings nodded, his eyes running over the camp again with their rapid, keening look. A little suspicion roused in Shane as he watched that swift scrutiny. But it fled when the newcomer spoke again.

"I'd been rooty, too, if I had me a couple of bales of plew in these stacks. Isn't a post on white-water that can boast a take like this, and McFairn isn't the only factor that'd burn a little powder to have it turn up at St. Joe to his credit. Comin' in a while ago I could hear a *chanson* comin' out of here and see the fires a mile away. But there wasn't a hand laid to me till I stepped ashore. I heard there was a first-class fur-war on up here between the free-traders, McFairn's Anglican Company, and the Yankee Company at Fort National, with Four Men's band of Blackfeet prowlin' to make it more interesting. But here you sit at an overdue rendezvous without any outposts up and down river to keep steel out of you back! You boys so tough a knife-blade can't hurt you?"

Carcajou Shane colored. It was, in a way, a just criticism. And the fault, also in a way, was his. But the boys didn't come into a rendezvous after a long and bitter winter to stand guard or patrol the river. They came in to make their trade, load new supplies, and name next year's meeting-place. They came to swap yarns with old friends, to lie owlishly to strangers, and to drink more whiskey than they could hold. The brotherhood was accustomed to the jealousy of the companies and the occasional malice of the roving Blackfeet. And not for these things would a single man of them forego an hour of the rowdy joy of a rendezvous. Singly and scattered, they were the greatest warriors on the rivers. Banded together, they were invincible. They knew it, and they feared no attack.

Shane stood up, his eyes travelling apprehensively over the encampment. Down by the river, the Canuks and the 'breeds had gathered around the mad padre, horsefaced old Pere Satane. His dolorous bass was leading off into the river-song of the *voyaguers*.

The surging, rollicking chant of that woods-tongue *chanson* eased Shane, its confident, reckless beat building up in him as it always did. He turned to Hastings, spreading his hands wide with a smile.

"What could hurt *them?*" he asked.

Tal Hastings had pulled his pistol from his belt. Swiftly he shucked off the weathered caps over the charges in its cylinder and replaced them with gleaming new ones. When he raised his head, his eyes had grown bleak and sharp with urgency.

"Maybe nothing!" he agreed shortly. "But we'll damn soon find out. I been trying to break it gently. Half an hour ago I sneaked past forty men, headed by a red-whiskered giant who might be John McFairn. They were headed this way, and they were toting war—not trade goods—with 'em!"

II

IF Tal Hastings had felt doubt about Carcajou Shane, it swiftly fled. The old trapper stood woodenly for a moment, blinking his eyes and trying to understand what Tal had told him. Then he erupted into a volcano of roaring action. His great voice lifted over the camp, striking at the scattered groups like a battering ram.

"Satane!" he bellowed, "Abel, Williams! Get a fire going down there on the water. Douse the rest of 'em. McFairn's comin' —an' he wants trouble!"

In seconds, the face of the camp changed. A slight, lithe boy ran in from the bedding-ground, carrying a rifle and belt which he handed to Pere Satane. The singers choked off their *chanson,* dragging timber swiftly onto the shingle at the water's edge and starting a big fire. Fur-bales were yanked back to the timber-fringe, stacked in one pile, and two men spread out into the grass on either side to guard them. The bung was slammed back into the whiskey-barrel, and it was rolled into the brush.

The river-song was dead. Its rollicking boastfulness was gone. A grim line was cut across faces which had been stupid with drink or flushed with fun. Extra guns were being charged, ramrods whistling in their bores. Shane, himself, had plunged down among the boats, flinging men right and left into positions from which they could hamper an attack. Hastings grinned to himself, felt the excitement of the moment lift him. On the long trek out from the Missouri town, there had been no way of knowing if his hunch would work. Many times he had wondered if he was a fool, if he had bitten off more than he could chew.

The reaction of this rendezvous of wild men to the word he brought in with him eased all of that, and he forgot everything except that a fight was facing a legion of which he was to become an important part.

Moments later, the swiftly-running shadows of war-canoes creased the smoothness of the Bighorn. Down on the river bank the alarm raised.

"Hola, *ennemi!*" and a moment later, confirming his guess as to the identity of the crew he had passed, "McFairn, *Le Rouge* McFairn!"

A rifle-shot drowned out the cry. A sheet of muzzle-flame licked in from the river. Under its cover, the canoes swung sharply inward. Among the legion's own boats a man spun eerily and fell in the mud. Others broke cover and ran for the camp, preferring to get behind the blazing beacon now flaming high on the river-bank to make their stand. Carcajou Shane came loping up, his wide face dripping with sweat, and recharging his weapon as he ran.

"We're spread too thin!" he howled at Tal. "They'll come ashore right in the middle of us!"

"Spread wider, then!" Hastings shot back. "Give 'em room and let 'em land. We'll make them sorry!"

Shane grunted, apparently grateful for someone else's strategy to bolster his own. He wheeled back, roaring to the trappers to give ground. Tal raced away in a circling loop, his eyes searching expertly for those among the defenders who could be spared from the present positions. The first of these he saw was the boy who had brought Satane his belt and gun. The kid was hunkered down behind a log, laboriously levelling a heavy rifle. Tal dropped a quick, hard hand to his shoulder.

"Save it for a minute. Trail me. We'll make it hot for 'em!"

The boy looked up, shook his head. He waved his hand toward a break of ground closer to the river where Satane and some

of the Canuks were braced against the men pouring out of the landing canoes.

"I always stick with Pere," he protested. "I'll be all right!"

"All right!" Tal pulled up, wheeled back. "Who gives a damn how you'll be?" he snapped. "A kid your age should be as good as a man! Now, confound your hairless chin, get on your back legs and track me. We've got a fight to make!"

The kid colored and a blank, half-amused astonishment showed in his eyes. But he straightened, lifted the heavy rifle, and started after Tal. Circling the camp, he found three others—two sourdoughs from the Kansas country and a surly, hatchet-faced Canuk. Swiftly Hastings dropped down through the timber and cut out to the river. Swinging upstream again, he brought his little company within a score of yards of the big fire on the water's edge. For the first time he got a good look at the attacking force. It was strung out in a double line between the water and the center of the camp, turning its fire two directions against the defenders crouched in the timber on either side.

Red John McFairn, called The Red by the Canuks, was about midway up the line of his men, watching for a chance to work across to the stack of baled furs. Tal dropped those with him into thick grass and waited. Directly those defenders who were with Satane in the little break of ground were caught in a cross-fire and forced to drop back. When they did this, McFairn shouted and a party broke for the fur bales. Tal turned to his little company, then.

"Cut loose!" he barked tersely. "Start at the river. Pick every man off in that double line you can. Work slow and work sure. McFairn's boys won't like lead in their back any better than we do, and we might turn 'em!"

When Tal paused to reload his pistol after the first round, he saw that the kid with the big rifle was having trouble with its weight. Dropping his shot-pouch, horn and hand gun beside the slight figure, he lifted the rifle.

"I'll take that. You reload for the rest of us. We'll make a fightingman out of you, yet!"

The kid shot a quick, venomous look upward. Tal laughed and picked off a Fort Benedict man who was swinging a gun butt at one of the guards beside the fur bales. The hatchet-faced Canuk among those Tal had recruited snarled at him.

"Stick to your shooting, *mon ami*," he hissed. "Leave the *enfant* be or Pere Satane'll close your big mouth with steel!"

The kid shoved Tal's hand gun back, loaded. His lips curled above even teeth. "Mind your own shooting, Celestine!" the kid snapped. "You're doing precious little of it!"

There was a sharp sting to the words, and they were weighted with fact. Tal's grin widened at the black anger which spread over the Canuk's face. The kid reached for a spent rifle and plumbed its bore with a practiced stab of its rod. Taking up the short gun, Tal's grin froze. In spite of the determined fire pouring out of the grass into the backs of McFairn's men, the Fort Benedict chief had gotten half a dozen of them among the piled furs. They were pawing swiftly for the choicest bales. And the way back to the boats was held open by the still unbroken double line of men. Worse, another little party were bucketing water out of the river over the huge beacon Shane had ordered lit on the bank. It was guttering low, robbing the flame-stabbed darkness of the camp of its last light.

BARKING a sharp order to keep the fire coming from where they crouched, Hastings leaped up and sprinted away from the kid and his companions. Twice guns of the defenders roared at him, unable to tell friend from foe. But it was hard shooting and the slugs went wide. He drove straight at where he had last seen McFairn, hoping to take the leader and break the back of the attack. But McFairn had moved in the darkness and Tal missed him. He turned a little and charged toward the raiders at the fur bales. Across the camp, somebody else had the same idea. Carcajou Shane's drum-beat of a voice sledged into the gloom.

"Give 'em steel, lads—clean to the Green River!"

It was a grim, heartening cry. Tal fingered the haft of the knife at his belt. On the flat of the blade, just under the curl of the hilt-guard, was the name of the weapon, engraved deeply—*Green River.*

A blade like that, sunk to that lettering, meant a dead enemy in a good man's hands. Carcajou was ordering the legion to close in.

A man staggered close with a fur-bale across his shoulders. Tal kicked his feet out from under him, sledged the top of his head with the muzzle of his pistol, and ran on. A gun spewed fire almost into his face, blinding him for a moment, but he caught one of the man' arms. Jerking the arm across the top of his shoulder, he wheeled and bent double forward, throwing the leverage of his body against the arm. Bone snapped and the man who owned it sailed limply over Tal's head.

Down by the river a new alarm broke.

"They're headin' for the water!"

Angling back toward the river at a full run, Hastings crashed into another running figure. Still thinking of McFairn, but unable to make out faces in the gloom, Tal sank fingers into this man's shoulders. The fellow turned like a huge cat, swinging a hard fist into Tal's face. It shoook him to his moccasins and he went down. But he pulled the man with him. Frantically he rolled on the grass, trying to get clear. And when the other's bulk pressed him, he set his steel-corded legs about the middle of his opponent in a merceless scissors grip. They lay together silently, their breath whistling, one resisting a deadly grip, the other trying to bring it into full play. Down by the river Tal heard firing build rapidly up, then come to an abrupt halt. A harsh, angry shout raised up along the water.

"The dirty, back-stabbin', night-prowlin' sons! They got away, all of 'em!"

The man under Tal rolled against the scissors in a superhuman effort which gave him a moment's breath before the merciless grip shifted expertly and closed again.

"The hell they all got away!" the man wheezed desperately. "Get a hand up here, quick. I've got one of the devils!"

With a grunt Tal broke his hold and sat up. Something tugged at him with the sound of that half-boastful, half-pleading voice. Something that had to get out of him before it split him wide open. His laugh echoed against the timber.

"Hastings!" Carcajou Shane grunted painfully from a yard away. "You. Damn you for a belly-bustin' bull-snake. Ain't a whole rib in my carcass!"

III

ACOUNT of the furs by newly-lighted fires showed McFairn's raiders had gone down the Bighorn richer by three bales of prime plew. A count of the dead showed he had plenty of room in his bateaux for the fur on the home trip, for he had lost eleven men to four from the rendezvous. This count of the legion's tally, together with the knowledge that the Fort Bendict crew had been twice as strong as their own, drew some of the sting of the raid. The only sorehead in the battle-marked rendezvous was Carcajou Shane, who rubbed at his ribs and scowled blackly at Tal Hastings. But there was a glint of high fun in the old trapper's eyes which belied the blackness of his face.

The same glint was in Pere Satane's jet eyes when he led the kid who tracked with him across to where Tal was sitting.

"Ah, M'sieu," Satane said solemnly, "Pere owes to you a great something! For t'ree year I have take care of this little one, here. For t'ree year I have try to do what nature have make impossible—I have try to fashion a *voyageur* of this one. But you—ah, M'sieu!" Turning to the rest of the company, Satane raised his voice roguishly. *"Camarades, hola,* what a woods-runner this one is. In one little fight he is promise to make a man of Mili! And he does it. Mili swears that now she is a man, by gar!"

Tal stared at the kid. The more he stared, the more he saw what a fool he had been. This was a girl facing him! A small, beautiful girl with the devil in her dark eyes and her jet hair rolled tight to her head to fit under her river-cap. He felt heat flood his face. He saw the blackness drop from Shane's scowl. He heard the old trapper break into a roaring laugh that paid him back in full for his own glee at having bent Carcajou's ribs in the dark. Alone of the camp, the girl didn't laugh. But the mischievous, taunting little smile on her lips was harder to bear than the howls of the legion. He pulled to his feet in embarrassment.

"What now?" he asked Shane. The old trapper scrubbed the tears of joy from his eyes and sobered.

"Why now, Tal," he said slowly, "I reckon most of us'll want to go after a

little of that plew that grows atop two-legged critters up Fort Benedict way!"

"We'll want a place we can work from, then," Tal said thoughtfully. "A place where we can mould our bullets and stack our furs without getting caught like we were tonight!"

Carcajou eyed Tal speculatively. After a moment he stood up and jerked his head away from the fires.

"Son," he said quietly, "I want to talk to you."

Tal followed him into the shadows at the fringe of timber. Shane bit a huge chaw out of a plug of trade tobacco and rolled it reflectively across his tongue. Finally he spoke.

"Looky, Hastings, you've made a good dent with most of the boys at this gatherin'. But they ain't fools, no more'n me! None of us is swallerin' appearances—that you jest *happened* along, two jumps ahead of them Benedict wolves! It's a nice yarn about how you heard of me clean down in Leavenworth and tracked all the ways up here to find me. Only trouble is, it don't hang together! You talked, jest now, like you aimed to string along with us. Mebbe you'll tell me why?"

Tal had been expecting this. He reached carefully for his words. His whole mission in the north country hung on how this grizzled old veteran sized him up.

"I did hear of you in Leavenworth," he said slowly. "And that's where I came from. As to why I came, that's got to ride, for now. Say I heard there was a war up here and I wanted me a piece of it. When the sign's right, I'll lay out the rest of the story. Till then, I've got to be a fur man, fighting a fur man's fight, or I've got to get out! It's up to you, Shane."

The old man stood woodenly for a long moment. Tal felt shrewd old eyes measuring him clear to the roots. Finally Carcajou shot out his hand.

"We need you, son," he said quietly. "We need you bad. You got a hand at leadin' a fight and such gents are scarce. I'll pass the word through the bunch. Most of 'em will stick by us, I think. But there'll be soreheads, mostly Celestine's Canuks. Celestine's a bad one and he don't take shovin', even when it's to save his own skin. And he was one of them you shoved down to the creek tonight, along of Mili."

Tal shrugged. "You work a crew up the way you think. We'll try to hit on a good hideout tonight. In the morning I'm going back down river to Moline's post on Powder River. If we're aiming to tackle McFairn, it'd be nice to know Moline wouldn't come at us when we were caught short. I've got a notion I can talk that Yankee Fur factor into pullin' in his horns, complete!"

"You got that hunch from listenin' at Leavenworth again!" Shane said drily. "Ab Moline's allus had a streak of cat in him, but his own trappers, workin' on the starvation contracts he hands out, bucked him enough to keep his claws plumb wore down to the quick. He was mostly talk and damned little do. But somethin' happened to him this winter. Chest's popped out half a foot. Got plain cussed. Can't figger it unless somebody's proddin' him or he's got hisself a new brand of brave-maker to drink!"

Hastings shrugged. The two of them walked back into the camp. It had split apart. Abel Stone and Old Williams, Satane and Mili, four or five others who had come up trails from the south in the beginning, were gathered at one fire. Celestine had drawn the Canuks, the breeds, and Blue Wolf, the renegade Blackfoot, down to the boats. As Tal and Carcajou came out of the timber, Celestine moved up toward them, his men splitting off toward the scattered fur pile.

"Shane," Celestine said softly, "for long tam I think you getting old. Too old for smart trappair. *Certainment!* Now is proof. You take this Hastings like he is the brother. Could be Yankee Fur Company spy, making trap. No! Is *camarade*. Could be spy for Rouge McFairn, making trap for fools, also. No! Is good *voyaguer*. Bah! Not for Celestine! The fur, she is scatter from the bale. Nobody know which belong to him or how much. Celestine takes his men and they take one half of fur. More easy this way than counting, *hein?*"

As he spoke, the Canuk slid close to Carcajou Shane. The old trapper's face darkened appoplectically.

"Half!" he roared. "You stinking lynx, you and them white bellies that've listened to you never took a quarter of that stack over there! Damn you, Celestine. For ten seasons the free-trade's stuck together,

and because we did, we've made our way. You know that. Now, when we're against our toughest haul, you slide out. I'd see you in hell before you take half of that plew!"

A thin smile creased the Canuk's face. A hand whipped to the back of his neck, returning with a wicked, broad-bladed trapper's knife. He thrust the steel forward till it pressed against the swell of Shane's belly.

"Stand easy, Shane. Ever'body stand easy! The knife is sharp and the hand quick! Celestine was aim to play fair. Now he is a lynx. Pouf! A lynx don' care what he do. So, we take all the fur! If there is fight, Carcajou die—so!"

He made a short, ugly motion of the knife which, if had been thrust deep, would have disembowled the big trapper. Shane's face was white. Stone and Williams and the others stood like graven granite, careful that they didn't startle the renegade into thrusting his steel home. Pere Satane, his queer, intense eyes burning with a savage fire, trembled. But he held his arms rigidly at his sides.

THE Canuk's companions hastily loaded themselves with fur and started for the boats. Mili Duquesne let out a tortured cry and flung herself at Celestine.

He caught her with his free arm, pulled her in close to him, ignoring the flailing of her hard little hands.

"Ha, La Fleur!" he grinned, "this time room only for plew and my men. But one soon day—ah, you will see, *mon enfant.* That time I will come for you!"

Squirming madly, Mili bent and sank her teeth into Celestine's arm. With a sharp, angry oath, he flung her spinning from him. She clung to his wrist until he shook her savagely free.

It happened in a moment, but it was the little break in the Canuk's attention that Tal needed. His hand moved easily across in front of his belt. His pistol slid from leather, levelled, and fired in a smooth rythm.

Celestine's knife spun angrily off into space. The renegade screamed and clutched at his shattered wrist. Tal moved forward, forcing the man back toward his boats with every step. Abel Stone and Old Williams had their guns up, stonily on the Canuk's crew. Bales of fur spilled from nerveless shoulders. In moments the whole party was at the edge of the water.

"Shove off!" Tal told Celestine tonelessly.

The Canuk whimpered. "But the plew —one quarter belongs to us!"

"Shove off!" The words were as brittle as shattered ice. Celestine stood uncertainly for a moment, his eyes blazing and the pain of his wound pulling his face into an ugly mask of hatred. Then he turned and stepped into the batteau.

Carcajou stood at Tal's elbow until the boats were lost in the shadows over the river. Finally he turned and touched Tal's arm.

"Thanks, son," he said simply.

Mili sat hunkered over the fire when they turned back into the camp, one hand up to an ugly bruise across one cheek. A hot blaze burned in her eyes. But it was no match for the consuming heat in those of Pere Satane, crouched in awkward comfort beside her. Satane looked up as Tal and Shane approached.

"Mysel', I come from the lak country to the far nort'. I am Canuk, by gar! One tam I am man of peace, I am padre, I carry the Book. Then I am sick in my head, and I am no longer a good padre. I am devil. I take off my coat. I t'row the Book away. I am *maudit,* plenty *maudit.* Then I find *mon enfant,* my little flower. She make me different again!"

He stopped, looked wildly around him.

"Is insult to *Patrie,* to lak country, to Canuk, that devil! He t'row down La Fleur and mak promise to her. Satane mak promise, too! With my hand, slow, plenty slow, I kill him one soon day!"

Mili jerked her hand sharply. "Pere! Be quiet!"

A gentleness was in her voice which seemed to wilt the heat from Satane's body. He sat back, his long and powerful body slack, his eyes docile. She turned to Tal.

"Those furs—a part of them—belonged to Celestine."

Tal nodded.

"But you kept them!"

He nodded again.

"You talk about fighting McFairn. And there's also M'sieu Moline at Fort National. They have furs, too."

"We'll take fur wherever we find it,

Miss," Tal said quietly. "Just as we'll take trouble wherever it comes. We'll store the fur until it's all done."

"And when it is done, M'sieu war-maker, what then?"

Tal grinned. "Why, then we'll divide it, like—"

"Like all good thieves, eh?" Mil cut in. Her face lightened, a lopsided grin pulling engagingly at her bruised features. "We'll divide it with the poor! Some to Anglican Fur Company when it promises to be good. Some to Ed Moline when he's blown all the powder from his guns. Some even to poor Celestine if he escapes Pere that long! I like you, leather-man. You have strong, hard hands and a quick gun. The north-land needs you. I heard you speak of a hiding-place. Good! I give you one. Pere, in the morning we go to *Le Havre!*"

IV

MILI'S haven on the Poposia fork of the Bighorn was ideal, a hidden bowl formed by an accident of geology and erosion. The Poposia had its beginning somewhere in the heart of the towering Wind River range. Working down from the divide, the little river had found its way blocked by the sharp, unbroken rise of the last ridge between itself and the great basin. Searching with the persistence of water, it had found a crevass and had cut an underground channel through the ridge. On the basin side it jetted out of solid rock like a huge spring. What Mili and Pere Santane had discovered was that in some previous age, the Poposia had cut another such underground channel under the ridge, then had abandoned it for the one it now used. There was, then, a few rods from where the river burst from the rock cliff, a brush-covered hole which was the mouth of a water-worn tunnel leading under the front peaks to the little bowl of *Le Havre*—The Haven.

A cabin was built there. Ample water and grass were at hand. The steeply-sloping sides of the little bowl and the towering mountains about it made entry impossible, except by way of the tunnel. A trail was worked up one wall to a pinnacle on the front ridge, from which the whole of the Bighorn Basin spread out into the haze of distance. It was a place of security, to which battle-scarred men could retreat for rest and relaxation. Tal was pleased. But a curiosity tagged him. He dragged Carcajou Shane to one side.

"This girl," he said, "where'd she come from? Mili and an old renegade like Satane. It's a funny set-up!"

"You don't know?" Shane shrugged in surprise. "Mili was picked up by Four Men's band of Blackfeet when she was so young that all she can remember is her first name. Maybe fifteen-sixteen year ago. Nobody but old Four Men knows where he got her. He kept her with his own daughter for years. Satane was on one of his loony spells and seen her in the Blackfoot camp. Tried to buy her out. Old Four Men like to busted a blood-pipe, he got so upset over anyone tryin' to get her away from him. Had Satane snatched up by the slack of his breeches and tossed out'n the camp.

"Satane got the notion she was some kin of his and sneaked her out'n Four Men's lodge. Lord knows how. Been sort of a game of hide'n seek, ever since. Part of the time since then Satane's been sane enough to know she's jest a strange white gal. Part of the time he thinks she's got his own blood. But loony or not, that Canuk has shore took care of the kid. Taught her everything he knew, then he put her in a mission, over on the Belle Fourche. Four Men found out where she was and hit the place with a hundred braves. But Satane was an hour ahead of him and got her out. They found this place, then, and holed up here, trapping in the valleys behind *Le Havre* and just pokin' their heads out for supplies at rendezvous."

This information eased Tal's curiosity.

"We could do with more men, Carcajou," he said. The old trapper looked up quickly, his eyes twinkling knowingly at the change of subject.

"We could," he agreed, solemnly. "Me and Abel Stone was talkin'. They's a few boys across South Pass on the upper Green that didn't come in this spring. Like as not, they been cut down by company wolves from Forth Benedict or Fort National. But we figgered it might be worth while, takin' a look-see for 'em. Even with them, though, boy, we ain't got a army and them two company posts have got plenty guns. I'd shore like to hear you'd drawed Moline's

teeth when you get back from Fort National."

"I'll try," Tal grinned.

FORT National, headquarters post of the Yankee Fur Company, sat on a low headland at the junction of the Yellowstone and the Powder River, four hundred miles north and east of *Le Havre*. Hastings, in a light canoe, rode into its landing after noon of the fifth day. He had kept to his paddling steadily, but he hadn't tried to make a record run. And he'd had time to do a lot of thinking. Coming up from Leavenworth, he had hoped that he could parley, not only with the factor at Fort National, but also with Red John McFairn. The attack on the free-trade rendezvous had ruled that out. It was pretty plain that McFairn was partly responsible, at least, for the blood tinting the white-water rivers.

Ab Moline was a different matter. Carcajou had pointed out that the man, usually mild, had changed in the past season. It was possible that a palaver would be a wasted effort with him, too. The rich fur sign on every hand on his trip up the Yellowstone convinced Tal that this north country was a stake worth fighting for. And if Moline chose to fight, the brotherhood at *Le Havre* would have two dangerous enemies.

For a while Hastings planned to talk plain to Moline. Yankee was, after all, an American company. Its factor might be impressed by Tal's true identity. If he was, things would go simply at the post. But if he wasn't, his knowledge of the facts behind Tal's coming into the country would peril the whole plan by which Hastings hoped to secure a peace between the warring fur factions. In the last moment, Hastings decided to carry on the same pose by which he had won a place among the free-traders.

He stepped ashore into a stockade which looked more like a regimental Army barracks than a trader's establishment. Every man was heavily armed, even down to the Shoshone attendants. A truculent, hostile tension was in the air. Two gun-braced trappers closed in on him as he started across the compound. One of them touched his arm, halting him.

"I suppose you and yore partner was bound in with a load of fur. You got jumped, lost yore furs, and yore pard was kilt. So you come in to square up!"

Tal eyed the two men. "I might," he agreed.

The trapper who had spoken laughed, short and ugly. "A damn free-trader, then!" He exulted. "We got a welcome for you woods-runners. Shuts a howl up quicker'n anything you ever see. It goes like this—!"

He and his fellow moved forward with anticipation. Tal had seen a like game played often enough on the Arkansas. Two men with a third between them could deal that third man a terrific amount of punishment in but moments, and at the same time, not harm him seriously. It was as good a way as any other of taking the fight out of a man quickly. As these two closed, Tal ducked down, straightening both arms out at once as he leaped upward again. He caught one full in the face, smashing him flat and kicking. The other man had turned away from that streaking blow, taking it on his shoulder. He roared, now, pawing at an enormous muzzle-loader in his belt.

Tal jerked his own gun free, saw the man was slow, and deliberately stepped in. With a seemingly gentle wipe of the weapon, he laid its solid barrel against the man's head just under the edge of his fur cap. The blow made a sharp little sound like a tapped melon. The man dropped limply. Tal turned on his heel, angling toward a door marked with a little office sign. The compound was spotted with rooted men who had watched eagerly for the climax of the little game their two fellows played. Now they stood surly and dark-faced, suddenly very careful under Hasting's swinging gaze.

Pushing the door ahead of him open, Tal stepped into Ab Moline's office. Two men were there. One was a tall, booted youngster in the uniform of the United States Cavalry. The other was a slight man with a high, intelligent forehead and the quick restless movements of the neurotic. The first impression was good, that here was a man you could sit down and talk to, who'd hear you out. Then the impression died and there was only a pair of queer, terribly intense eyes, staring out above great, dark circles on strain-marked cheeks. Tal stopped in front of Moline's desk.

"Thanks for the welcome, *mon factor!*" he said drily.

The factor's stare held unbrokenly and he made no answer. The cavalry man in the corner stepped eagerly forward.

"I'm Bill Starrett, Ninth Cavalry, attached at Fort Laramie. I did a hitch at Council Bluffs a few seasons ago. I ought to know you, mister. I'm sure I've seen you!"

Tal sensed the army man was lonely and uncomfortable, that he was eager for someone to talk to. But the risk was too great. He shook his head slowly.

"No, soldier," he said. "No, you've never seen me!" He didn't make it loud, but the quiet words struck like rams. Starrett looked at him keenly for a moment and then backed up, shaking his head. For the first time, Moline spoke.

"There isn't any welcome for strangers at Fort National, brother. But you got past the boys, so say your piece and get out!" His voice had a rough and peculiarly uneven gait to it. Tal realized the man was deadly serious. He spoke as abruptly, himself.

"Out on the Poposia is a party of honest trappers that've turned pirate till they get back what was taken from them. They're going to a gunsmoke palaver with John McFairn. If you don't want them here, call your gundogs off the fur trails and open your post goods to free-trade like a white man!"

Moline seemed only barely able to understand the words. He continued to stare. His lips moved again.

"Free-traders!" he muttered. "Damned free-traders! And you're one of them!"

Tal nodded. A fanatical grin pulled Moline's lips upward.

"See that soldier?" he asked, stabbing toward the corner with a long, trembling finger. "He brought dispatches up to me from Lieutenant Cowan at Fort Laramie. Tomorrow he goes back with a letter from me telling Cowan to come north with his troop. How long could your pirates on the Poposia last against the United States Army? And the first command Cowan will give when he gets here is to your firing-squad. I'll hold you for him! That's my answer, that's my answer to your trouble-making, big-mouthed, belly-aching woods-runners!"

Tal tilted back on his heels. Cowan, Lieutenant Jackie Cowan! Poor devil! He wondered what Cowan would do in the open field against the generalship of such men as Carcajou Shane and Satane. The thought brought a smile to his lips. The smile stayed. Moline made big talk about keeping him here. But if he'd been able to walk unharmed into this office, he'd walk out of the post the same way. He switched his head toward the soldier in the corner, meaning to say something, but Starrett's eye were wide in sudden, soundless alarm.

Desperately Tal flung to one side, dragging at his belt-gun. But he was too late A rifle-barrel, swung carefully from behind, skewed his hat off and something like a whole magazine of powder exploded inside of his head. He tried to keep his feet under him, to continue the lift of his gun. But his strength drained swiftly, the room darkened, and he pitched forward.

V

HASTINGS roused to the shaking of an insistent hand. He was flat on his back on a rough cot in a small, dark room. The only light came through a grated opening in the door. He sat up, and as he did so, his hand brushed the shoulder of the figure bending above him. His fingers went through a soft, hanging mass of heavy hair. It was a woman.

"Quiet!" the figure whispered. "Corporal Starrett is with me. Keep low and follow us!"

Tal came off the cot like a cat, shook his head to clear it, and moved forward after two figures who slid out the door ahead of him. Outside, they swiftly skirted the inside wall of the compound, keeping to deep shadow and not halting until they had come up against a small, heavily barred door at the lower end of the enclosure. They paused here a moment, Tal coming up with them. Starrett fumbled with the great bars, sliding them noiselessly back. Light was a little better and Tal could dimly see the woman.

She was young, apparently about the same age as Mili. She had the same high, sensitive features as Ab Moline, but her lips were more full. The hair which Tal had inadvertantly touched was a warm, rich

gold which she wore with a proud, unconscious tilt of her head. She kept close to the cavalryman's elbow and Tal caught the brightness in Starrett's eyes as he turned back to her. Then the gate was open and they were through. The girl caught Tal's arm outside the stockade.

"You were a fool to come in here like you did today!" she hissed. "But you couldn't know that Fort National is a powder-keg ruled by a man out of his head. That's why I got Bill to help me get you out. Don't expect anything more from me, though. I'm Anne Moline, and I'll stick with dad, whatever he does, whatever happens!"

Bill Starrett bent over her, his voice rough with urgency. "Your dad's a wild man, Anne," he said. "He doesn't even know you, half the time. I was here two days before he could make enough sense out of my dispatches to figure out who I was. He's got every cutthroat in the north in here, now. It isn't safe for you. I'm leaving for Laramie in the morning. Come with me!"

The girl shook her head. "No, Bill! Something's come over dad. Something's squeezing down on him. I've seen him break like this before. I've got to find out what's troubling him and end it. He'll be all right, then. It's just that his nerves get too tight for his body when he's under pressure!"

Starrett shook his head soberly.

Tal touched Starrett's sleeve. "I think you know who I am," he told the soldier. Starrett nodded gravely. "Keep it to yourself. I don't know what Moline wrote in the message he's sending to the commandant at Laramie. But you go in to Lieutenant Cowan and tell him you saw me. Then you tell him to keep his troop away from up here. Tell him that if he doesn't, he'll lose every man. Tell him for me!"

Starrett touched his cap.

Tal turned to Anne Moline.

The girl pointed to the river. "Some of the men raided your canoe and looted out your equipment. I had Bill get up another one from our stores. It's loaded and ready to go. Shove off, trapper, and stay long gone from the Powder River!"

Moments later Hastings was on the water, dipping his paddle strongly against the lazy current of the Yellowstone.

SIX nights later, bitterly weary from endless hours dipping his canoe upstream, he came to the confluence of the Poposia and the Bighorn and beached his canoe in deep brush. For two days he had been on edge. Normally ranging the higher country at this season, the Blackfeet were in the basin. Their sign was plentiful and twice the last day he had been forced to haul out into hiding while small parties had passed him on the river. Still twenty miles from *Le Havre* and too weary to drive on, he would have liked a fire and a hot meal. But he made it a dry camp, rolling into a blanket in the brush beside his canoe. An hour later, he fought out of a drug-like sleep to hear a strange sound rolling down the river. A *chanson* with a solitary singer:

"Runners of the woods—
Hunters of the fur—
Men of the river!

Some are dead young—
Some are dead old—
We live forever! . . ."

The voice came closer, the singer apparently skirting the near bank with his canoe. Tal tumbled from his blankets with a curse. Carcajou! Coming down-river into all this Indian sign and with that stentorian voice blaring out ahead of him. Tal was in the water to his thighs when Shane came abreast in the darkness. Afraid to raise a shout loud enough to break through the old trapper's chant, Tal smacked the palm of his hand down flat onto the water with a smart chop. The sound was like that of a beaver's tail, warning a colony of coming danger. Carcajou's voice choked off in mid-syllable. His great shoulders leaned against his paddle, spinning the canoe in toward the brush like a live thing. Tal caught the prow of the craft and towed it on in. As it hit the bank, Shane piled over its side, squinting.

"Hastings!" he grunted. "What the devil. . . .?"

Tal was trotting swiftly back to his own canoe. As he buckled his belt on with its pouch, horn, knife and gun, he snapped one soft word over his shoulder.

"Blackfeet!"

Then he jerked up his rifle and began cutting through the timber for higher

ground. Shane lumbered along behind, silently. That one clipped word had answered everything he needed to know. The two of them travelled swiftly. But the Blackfeet were ahead of them. Tal had heard that this one tribe of Indians could see in the dark like a cat. He believed it. In the first twenty rods they flung themselves silently prone twice just in time to avoid a streaking brave, cutting for the river.

The third time they were not so lucky. No single warrior, but a wide-flung, hawk-eyed net swept toward them. Watching the charging shadows, Tal measured his chances. Then he stood up, holding his rifle high above his head with both hands. Grunting satisfaction, the Indians surrounded them, took their guns, and prodded them forward. They moved for half an hour through heavy timber, coming out at last into a grassy little park surrounding a spring-head. Several small cooking-fires were burning, but there were no lodges, indicating that this was one of the several hunting-parties whose tracks had troubled Tal the past two days.

The two prisoners were marched across to the central fire where a tall, incredibly wrinkled old man stood waiting. He stared at the two white men for a long time in haughty silence. Finally he spoke.

"This is the land of the Blackfeet. For many years there have been white men among us. And there has been room. Now the white men make war among themselves. There is no longer room. Four Men now has need of the white girl who was his daughter. Where is she?"

Tal's knowledge of the formal Blackfoot tongue was unequal to the old man's sonorous speech. Carcajou translated for him, ending up with his own explanation.

"That's Four Men, hisself, son. And I judge he's lookin' for Mili. I don't get the connection between white men and war and room in the country and her. But we don't know nothin'. Don't fergit!"

Tal nodded. "You take the play from here on out. I'll back you up."

Carcajou spoke to the old chief at length, waving his hands in wide gestures and with considerable haughtiness of his own. Tal saw that the Indian was impressed. He stood a long time in obvious thought, then he shrugged, spoke swiftly, and turned disinterestedly back to the fire. A pair of warriors seized the two prisoners, bound them securely, and rolled them against an out-thrust rock where they were visible to every eye in the camp. When the two Indians had moved away, Carcajou swore heartily.

"Blast his pemmicanned red hide!" he snorted. "I really put her on for him. Made a mighty important and interestin' gent out of you. Claimed you was a big stick in the Army, which Four Men has got a healthy respect for. I claimed we was fresh from Fort Laramie—that we hadn't seen a woman in six months. I threw in everything I could think of. Then, just when I think I've got him stopped, he shrugged. The old devil's smart. Says I am a passable liar, but that Mili was stolen by a white man. We are white men. So, by hell, we know where Mili is!"

Tal grinned wryly. "He'll find out different!"

"Shore!" Carcajou agreed grimly. "But we'll be a mite uncomfortable while he's doin' so. It appears they been makin' plenty tracks in their hunt for Mili and all his boys is tired. But they got a elk tonight. They're goin' to feed big. And in the mornin' they'll get around to pryin' for what they want to know with hot sticks. Only seen one man that could walk after a pryin' like that. And he was blind as a bat!"

Carcajou fell morosely silent. Tal watched the camp before him prepare for their feast. His own belly was empty and it made him uncomfortable to watch the big steaks beginning to sizzle over the flames. He turned his head toward to comment that this was, itself, no mild form of torture. But the old trapper, bound as he was and stacked awkwardly against the rock, had coolly dropped off into a heavy sleep. Tal grinned. No breed of man that ever walked was the equal of these grizzled runners of the woods. Directly he found himself getting drowsy and he followed Carcajou off.

Hours later, he was jerked upright against his bonds by a queer, foreign sound on the thin night air. Shane was already awake, breathing heavily. Among the embers of the fires, Four Men's warriors were bunched in startled huddles. The sound came again, down the slope toward the

river. A rollicking, challenging, metallic sound which could not be mistaken.

"A bugle!" Tal gasped. "A bugle blowing *Charge!* Hell, it can't be!"

But it was. Four Men barked quick orders. His men slid hastily into the night. Moments later, three men broke into the clearing at a full run. Back in the timber guns barked, sniping at the swift shadows of the retreating Blackfeet. The first of the three to reach the two bound men was Abel Stone. Slung across his shoulder by a blackened thong was the battered loops of an ancient Army Issue bugle. Stone caught Tal's amazed stare at the instrument as he bent over his bonds. He chuckled.

"Old Brassy's the best damn Injun-fighter I ever seen. Never without her on the trail. Like today. Carcajou pulled out'n the Green River country ahead of me. I was bringing back the bunch of boys we rounded up over there. When I got to *Le Havre* and he wasn't there yet, I was worried some. Thought I'd been smellin' Blackfeet last two or three days. So we cut down-river till we found your canoes!"

Carcajou pulled himself to his feet, chafing his wrists.

"Abel," he said sourly, "there's times you're a handy gent. But you shore torture music on that horn!"

Stone grinned. "It did for Four Men. But it won't hold him long. Likely he's got other parties about. We'd better skin for the river and make *Le Havre* afore he gets us all!"

VI

TAL and Carcajou, together with Abel Stone's party, came up through the little bowl, taking their ease after breakfast. Tal's eyes swept over the company eagerly, taking little note of the fact that the brotherhood was growing. One face was missing from the company. He cornered Pere Satane.

"Where's Mili?"

Satane gestured up the little trail which lead to the lookout at the summit of the front ridge. Tal turned in that direction, but Pere caught his arm.

"Non, mon ami," he said. "Always she go alone. Not even me does she take when she goes to look. Presently she will be back. But she say that one on watch cannot use the eye if the lips are busy in talk with another. Be patient, M'sieu. *La Fleur* has been a long time in *Le Havre*. She will not vanish."

Tal pulled up, suddenly aware of his obvious eagerness to see the girl. Satane cackled gleefully, as if he had made a great joke, and ambled off, his long frame casting an angular shadow on the ground. Carcajou came across from one of the fires, carrying two brimming mugs of whiskey. Tal was grateful. He needed a shakedown. Carcajou squatted and began to trace aimless figures in a patch of gravel.

"Four Men's got me worried," he said. When Blackfeet gits restless, the lid's b'ilin' off'n hell for sartain! Them devil's have got no soul. Four Men'd soon j'ine one enemy to wipe out another as not. If him and Red McFairn was to get together, we'd have a plenty tough steak to chew, boy!"

"He likely did work down this way looking for Mili," Tal agreed; "and he's likely got some oily scheme in his pouch that he needs her for or he wouldn't be looking so hard. But something else dragged him down here, too. I'd like to know, the worst way!"

Carcajou gnawed at his tobacco plug and stared sourly at the ground. Suddenly he looked up.

"How'd you do at Fort National?"

Tal shrugged. "Wonderful!" he said disgustedly. "Fine! Got a knot on my head and had my breeches pulled out of a tight lock-up by straight luck!"

Swiftly he ran in the details of his talk with Ed Moline and his escape. Carcajou whistled.

"Things is blackenin' up just about as fast for us as that rain on the mountains, back there. I'd say there was a fair chance that Anglican and Yankee mought git together. Then if Four Men found we had Mili here or decided he wanted some mountain-man hair, we'd be caught in as nasty a middle as I ever want to see! Only one good thing in the shebang. That young corporal skiddin' down to Laramie gives us an edge. You see what Abel's bugle done last night. Think what the brass-button boys could do, themselves!"

Tal shook his head. "That's the one thing we don't want, Carcajou!" he said sombrely. "We've got to keep that little army detachment from Fort Laramie out

of the basin. We've got to! Those soldiers are the fightingest there are. But they've been trained to plains work. The timber and rivers up here'd cross them completely. They're only one company. Four Men could gobble them up alone in a quarter hour if he caught them out in the basin. And once his Blackfeet had defeated an army command, they'd lose their fear of the brass buttons and the carbines. There wouldn't be anything to hold them in check. They'd clean every white out of the north. They'd sweep the country clear to the Platte!"

Carcajou's eyes widened in sudden understanding. He started to say something, but he was cut off by a quick, eager voice, calling from above.

"Tal! Tal Hastings!"

Rocking back on his heels, Tal looked up. Half way down the trail from the lookout, Mili was beckoning to him eagerly. He leaped up, running for the foot of the trail. In moments he was panting beside her. She turned and went on toward the top, still motioning him to follow. She ran up the winding track with an effortless ease which defeated him. When he reached the summit, he was blowing hard. She laughed.

"A mountain-man? Pouf! More like a swamp-bear!" The imps in her eyes danced for a moment, then they grew more serious.

"You want for the fur. You want for the fight. You want for the pirating, eh? Look!"

She pointed out over the basin. On a wide bend of the Bighorn under a low pass leading across to the Sweetwater valley to the south, a mass of batteaux and pirogues were beaching. Closer at hand six Indian canoes were drifting sluggishly with the current. It was a picture that didn't fit together. Hastings turned stupidly to the girl.

"You tell M'sieu Moline at Fort National he is make peace with us or he lose his fur, no?"

Tal nodded.

"Certainment!" she went on breathlessly. "Then I tell you how this is. The north country is Mili's country. She know it. When you leave Fort National, word is go to the Red McFairn at Fort Benedict that he will lose his furs, also. Rouge McFairn is a smart one. He thinks the furs will be taken when he makes his shipment down the Musselshell and the Missouri. So, he thinks to fool you. He makes a short peace with Four Men. The Blackfeet come in to trouble you. And while this is so, McFairn brings his furs up the Bighorn, under your nose, portage across to the Sweetwater, and takes them down the Platte!"

Tal squinted out over the vast area below, trying to identify the boats on the bend and the canoes on the river. Mili's guess was fantastic. But it had a ring of logic which fitted in with what he knew of John McFairn.

"Wish I had a glass!" he said absently.

The girl drew herself up, her eyes snapning. "A glass when Mili's eyes are here to look for you! Look, at the bend, now. Six batteaux, four pirogues. Maybe twenty bales of the fur. Then twenty Shoshones to carry them across the portage. Also maybe forty trappers with guns. And now, closer, on the river. Six canoes. In the woods back of them where the green is, more of them. Fifty Blackfeet, waiting for you to come racing down the river to the fur-boats. Is a nice trap. No?"

Tal straightened. His eyes reached out to the low pass between the basin and the Sweetwater, through which the portage would have to file.

He voiced his thoughts.

"We could hit them out there. Might get away with it, too, if another party worked down the river to keep Four Men's braves busy!".

Mili laughed excitedly. She started to sing:

"Runners of the woods—
Hunters of the fur—..."

She stopped abruptly, her eyes on the storm-clouds Carcajou had earlier seen forming against the main range of the Big Windies.

"Rain!" she said. "A hard one. The last time I saw clouds like that, so much water came into Le Havre that the river went out of its new channel into its old one for half a day and our tunnel was blocked!"

Tal eyed the clouds and saw something else in them. "It'll be wet travelling, but

that storm's made for us. We can come in right on top of them without being seen if water's dropping hard enough!"

Mili shrugged and turned down the trail into *Le Havre*.

TAL split command of the attack between Carcajou Shane and himself. They worked it out in fine detail. Carcajou took thirty of the fastest trackers in the company assembled at *Le Havre* and started out as the rain began in a wide loop toward the saddle of the pass. A few minutes later, with Satane to guide, Tal loaded the remainder of the crew in four canoes and started down the river.

In the midst of flashing lightning and the ear-splitting roll of thunder, they engaged the fringe of Four Men's ambush and broke the thing out into the open. They ran some risk, lessened by the driving rain, in working from canoes. But the whole idea was to convince Four Men that this was a raiding party sent out to try for McFairn's furs. For two hours they kept a running, shifting attack going on the river. At the end of that time, they began to draw back as though slowly retreating under Four Men's pressure.

In point of fact the violent storm so cowed the superstitious Blackfeet that they put up little show. In late afternoon, Tal bunched his men and made a quick run at Four Men's advanced party. They gave hurriedly. Turning his own crew on their heels, then, Tal raced them up the river, hid their canoes, and got them into the secret tunnel into *Le Harve* before the Indians could close up and find the entrance.

By this time the rain had risen to a sullen roar, cascading down savagely from a leaden sky. Hastings was a little uneasy about Carcajou's party when he saw that a little trickle of water was already beginning to run through the entrance tunnel. But when they came out of the bore into the open of *Le Harve*, he found the other section of the attack was back ahead of him. The whole bowl, despite the pelting rain, was echoing with high humor. The floor of the cabin was littered with fresh bales of fur. And under guard of a dozen eager guns, John McFairn, himself, stood prisoner!

Carcajou came up, clapped a heavy hand to Tal's shoulder. He jerked a derisive thumb at the huge, red-bearded factor.

"This curly wolf's been howlin' for our chief!" he exulted. "Sail into him, boy! Haul his teeth. Make him spit sideways and walk like a duck!"

"So you're the lad that planned this coup!" McFairn growled. "You're a good planner, Hastings. But you don't look far enough ahead. You got some fur off of me. You've got me, for the time. But you can't hold me! Old Jean Blanchard, who owns my company, put me at Fort Benedict because I couldn't be beaten. And I can't! You'll see. There's different days coming in the north. Days when John McFairn's top dog and nothing between me and Leavenworth that don't play my music!"

"Talk!" Hastings said in flat scorn. The factor's face swelled with rage.

"Talk!" he choked. "Why, damn you, I'll have you flayed in my compound by fall! In two weeks Old Blanchard is due in at my post on his yearly inspection of Anglican forts. I'll take him out to see what a couple drunk Shoshones can do to you afore I tell him Benedict belongs to me, not to his skinflint company any more!"

Tal shrugged, turning away. But McFairn's boasts had a ring of assurance behind them which made him uneasy. A moment later Mili touched his arm and pointed at the foot of the bowl. Waters were churning there, overflowing from the river passage to go rolling into the entrance tunnel. With the girl at his side, he moved back to the prisoner, motioning for Satane to cut the tight bonds which held him.

Then he faced McFairn.

"The tunnel's full of water," he said. "You can't get away. Maybe you'll want to walk around. You're going to be prisoner in this valley till we've got a peace in the north, and you're going to be a prisoner on a long ride down the big river to the Territories. You better use your legs while you can!"

McFairn made no answer. When he was freed he walked aimlessly toward the whirlpool churning angry, muddy foam in the craggy rocks around the mouth of the rushing, flooded tunnel. The eyes of the camp followed him. He stood for a long moment, staring into the water. Tal saw

his shoulders raise and fall as if in resignation. Then, without warning and with a wild, derisive cry, he plunged into that deadly welter of raging water!

VII

FOR a moment Hastings stood in dazed astonishment. Then he broke into a dead run toward the water. Carcajou ran after him, caught his arm.

"No never-mind, son!" he said swiftly. "Red John must have figgered we'd treat him like a Blackfoot. Anyhow, we won't have to be feedin' him and postin' guard. If he wanted to go that bad, let him. Ain't ary man could live through the beatin' he'll get in that channel!"

Carcajou's certainty eased some of the self-blame from Tal's shoulders. It was of prime importance that John McFairn be taken out of circulation through the north country. It was, in fact, of minor importance whether he was a prisoner or dead. Tal had beeen unwilling to see the man in discomfort in the driving rain and had offered him what freedom there was while the channel was blocked. Now—if the Rouge did make it to the outside—all hell would break loose. And the secret of *Le Havre* would be known to the enemies of the brotherhood. He swung toward the motionless press of men at his back and singled Satane out.

"Get five men that can read trail-sign. You and Carcajou and me will take them out soon's the water drops. We'll find McFairn and bury him deep!"

Satane stared at the whirlpool. Slowly he shook his head.

"Mebbeso we don' find a dead man, M'sieu," he said softly. "The Rouge is wan brave feller! He is plenty strong and big like the ox. Mebbeso we find only tracks, tracks going nort'!"

Tal laughed shortly, ready to dismiss Pere's forebodings as part of the old man's dour nature. But Mili pulled at him.

"Listen to Pere, *mon ami!*" she urged. "Listen close. I know of a man who went out with the water through that tunnel one time. And he was unhurt!" The girl paused. "Pere knows. I was caught on those rocks in the last flood. He tried to reach me and was caught in the current. Hours later, when the water was gone, he came back in through the tunnel, his clothes torn from him and looking like a dead man. But he was untouched!"

It was fantastic. Tal shook his head in bewilderment. If McFairn had lived through the maelstrom. . . !

"Abel!" he barked. "Abel Stone! Satane and Carcajou and myself are taking five men with us to pick up the Rouge's carcass or track him down. But he might be alive and give us the slip. We can't take any chances. After the warning I gave him, Ed Moline'll be shipping his furs out of Fort National as quickly as he can. There's a lot of stolen free-trade pelts in those bales, too. We've got to have them. You take every other available man and head for Fort National. Keep well south till you're past the center of the basin so you won't meet up with Four Men. Then drive right on to the post and hit hard. Get the furs and get back here!"

A wide grin creased Stone's face, a pleasure at being chosen leader of an attacking force. Carcajou took off his sagging cap and wrung the water from it with a disgusted look at the sky.

"Getting lighter," he said glumly. "But we'll have to wait till night afore that channel's open. And look, boy. Don't worry about Abel meeting up with Four Men. McFairn shot off his mouth a mite to me trackin' back in from the pass after we'd took him. Appears he promised Four Men sixty rifles out'n his stock at Fort Benedict if'n the Blackfeet would throw a line between here and his fur shipment to keep us off him till he made the pass and was floatin' on the Sweetwater. He was plenty upset we'd took him prisoner. Said nobody at his post knew about his deal with the Indians and that if Four Men didn't get his guns, the Blackfeet'd wipe Benedict out. I got a hunch Four Men's already started north to do that. You know how a Indian is when he thinks he's been cheated!"

Tal hoped Shane was right. It would help matters considerably to have the woods cleared of the red devils if they were forced to look very far for McFairn's body or sign of the man. But time was passing, and if the Anglican factor had lived through the water, he was already on his way north. Impatiently Tal watched the thinning clouds above *Le Havre.*

LESS than an hour out of *Le Havre,* Satane and Carcajou uncovered sign on the bank of the Poposia that Red John McFairn had escaped death in the water-filled tunnel. He was apparently without moccasins, likely half-naked after the pummeling of the water. Minutes later, where Four Men had set his ambush the day before, they found a dead Indian, likely killed in the brush with Tal's feinting-party on the river. The Indian had been stripped of all his gear, his moccasins, and his leggings. Therefore, the sign McFairn left behind him was of an uncommonly large and heavy Blackfoot, traveling swiftly into the north.

Without equipment, certainly stiff and battered after his experience, it was a source of astonishment to Tal that the big factor managed to stay always ahead of his own racing party. But the sign was always cold and McFairn was always ahead. The chase lasted for six endless days in which the broad northland reeled past like an endless green carpet, stitched with swift rivers and wrinkled by the hills. They reached Benedict in the middle of the sixth night, eight weary men who had trailed a grim red ghost five hundred desperate miles.

It was obvious the factor had returned and that he expected pursuit. The great main gate of the imposing fort was closed and sentries were at firing-posts at each corner. It was also fairly certain that having reached his own base in safety and in possession of information about the force and location of the brotherhood, McFairn would set immediately about making plans to wipe them out. Having come this far, Tal wanted to know what these plans were. He had a sapling cut, back in the timber from the post, and notched along its length to serve as a crude scaling-ladder.

Sending Satane and the other five around to the front face of Benedict to make a false attack against the face, Carcajou and himself crept as close as they dared to the rear stockade and waited. After an interval, Satane's men set up a heavy, noisy firing from scattered points in front of the gate, as though a large force was drawn up there. Almost immediately, the sentries at the rear watch-boxes dropped to the inside, running toward the fighting. This was the chance. Throwing their sapling against the rear wall, Tal and Carcajou worked swiftly up its springy length, topped the wall, and kicked the sapling down behind them.

Inside the post, they split, keeping to shadow, each circling along the inner wall in opposite directions. Avoiding the post force whose attention was still held by the firing along the front, Tal crept from room to room, watching for McFairn's great shock of hair. It was slow work. He was less than half of the way around his circuit when the firing outside ceased suddenly. There was a brief period of unearthly quiet. Then a terrible yell rang out and half a hundred guns opened against the post. Tal froze. There could be no mistaking that yell. It was the Blackfoot war-cry. He was seized with sudden concern for the men under Satane, beyond the stockade. The wily old padre, in spite of his fits of madness, was a soldier. Likely enough, he'd spotted the Indians before they struck and eased his men clear of them. As this fresh attack gained way, Tal's concern spread to include his own safety and that of Carcajou, also still prowling within the walls. The attackers were boldly hitting full at the main gate. And from his own position across the wide compound, he could see the stout timbers giving way. He started a run across the open, reckless in search of Shane. At this moment, three things happened.

The gate gave way with a crash and Four Men's warriors poured into the post. In their vanguard, howling as loud as any savage, Celestine was leading a little troop of his renegade Canuks. On a firing-stage, half-way up the face of the stockade, a great, bull-chested figure with flaming hair appeared, roaring commands to the post garrison. And from a door close to Tal, a woman ran wildly into the open.

Tal saw he couldn't cross the compound, that Carcajou would have to make his own way. He saw, also, that Fort Benedict was doomed. And he recognized the running girl, even as his arms caught her. Anne Moline! There wasn't time to think. There wasn't time to talk. He barked one stabbing order at the white face in front of him.

"Grab by belt and stick behind me, quick!"

"My father!" the girl cried out. Tal

barked the single word once more, so forcefully the girl wilted and hooked her hands into his belt at the back.

"Quick!"

Turning, he drove through the shadows at a full run, Anne Moline fighting to keep her feet at that pace. As he passed the post's forge, he snatched up a woods-ax and raced on to the rear wall. As he ran along the stockade, his hands brushed the upright tree-trunks of which it was fashioned. When he came to two which were smaller than the rest and set together, he swung his ax. The wood seemed backed with iron. Great chips flew from his lightning strokes, but the hole he was slabbing out bit slowly. Sweat poured from him and his breath came in great sobs. In moments some of the Blackfeet or Celestine's men would see that winking ax and death would be swift. He still lacked inches from being through the wall and his arms were lead when a quick-strong hand tore the ax from his grip and sent it smashing with renewed vigor against the wood. In seconds the hole was through. He doubled the girl forward, saw her through the opening, felt himself thrust roughly after her. Outside, a huge figure straightened beside him.

"I got one of 'em, son, grab the gal's other hand. And run, run like hell for the timber!"

Tal sucked in a great breath. Carcajou! They raced forward in reaching strides, dragging Anne Moline between them.

VIII

HALF an hour later, the scattered band from *Le Havre* stood on a little knoll a quarter of a mile into the timber from Fort Benedict. Satane had gotten his men away from the post—four of them. Pere, himself, had been shot through with a rifle-ball, but he scorned the seriousness of it, saying that it would wait until Mili could tend it at *Le Havre*. Through a break in the timber the Anglican post was in full view, lighted by the flames licking high over it. A few moments after Satane's little company came straggling up where Tal and Carcajou and Anne Moline already stood, the girl gave a startled cry.

"Look!"

Tal jerked his head around. Fire had jumped to the roof of the main building of the doomed fort. At the edge of the roof, high above a compound packed with Blackfoot and renegade wolves, a solitary figure crouched, firing one after another of a stack of guns at his elbow into the press below. There could be no mistaking the bulk of the man, and in the fire-glow, his hair gleamed like flame itself. Even as the little company on the knoll watched, Red McFairn came to the end of his weapons and stood upright, shaking his fist in malevolent defiance. A long, feathered war-lance arched up from the compound in graceful flight. The Rouge made no attempt to dodge the weapon.

Transfixed by the graceful shaft, he stood yet a moment longer, silhouetted by the fire. Then he staggered backward across the roof and plunged through the rafters at a place where the flames had eaten through the shingles. A geyser of sparks shot up from the place where he fell. Tal Hastings turned slowly away. It was a fitting end for a fighter—friend or enemy.

Tal felt a sudden touch.

Carcajou tugged at his arm, pulling him apart from the rest.

"You should have gone the way I did in that post," he said. "I found what you were looking for, son! McFairn's office. Red John and Ab Moline and a young brass-buttons from Fort Laramie that Red John called Cowan. In a corner was old Jean Blanchard, McFairn's boss. They had him tied and they were tellin' him what all in hell they were going to do in this country—the three of them together. They were runnin' the free-trade out and takin' Blanchard's post away from him. They were keepin' more trappers from comin' up the river from the Territories. Everyone of 'em had a piece of the plan an' the only one that seemed unhappy about it was Ab Moline. I think you're right in what you said, that Moline's half crazy!"

"Easy!" Tal said, jerking his head toward the girl. "That's Moline's daughter!"

Shane's eyebrows climbed. "No wonder she's carryin' on! Mebbe I better tell her I seen him." Tal shrugged, following Carcajou back toward the others. But Carcajou's information about Ab Moline was outdated. The wounded Pere Satane was talking to the girl.

"Oui, Mam'selle, Pere know M'sieu Moline when he see him. I do not make the mistake. In five minutes after the Indians come, he slip out a little side gate with a soldier. M'sieu Moline, he don't want to go. I t'ink he want to look for you. But the soldier, he make plenty trouble. And in a little bit they are run quick for the timber. Then I don' see them again!"

Anne Moline spun to Tal. "You hear that?" she said eagerly. "Dad! He escaped. Quick! Let's get on the trail. We can overtake him!"

Tal nodded. Not that he agreed wholly with the girl. But with Celestine joined with Four Men, it was a reasonable bet that the wolves which were destroying Fort Benedict would strike next at *Le Havre,* closer than Moline's post at Fort National. It was imperative, then, that *Le Havre* be warned and manned immediately. There would be no time to search for Moline and Lieutenant Jack Cowan. Anne Moline would be safe with the brotherhood for the time being. At least as safe as Mili was. And it would do Jackie Cowan a lot of good to fight his way through the timber of this north country with an insane man for a partner.

Hastings was concerned about Satane's wound. But Pere laughed at him and Tal was forced to take what consolation he could from the fact they had only fifteen miles of footwork until they came to where they had left their canoes on a tributary of the Yellowstone.

THEY reached *Le Havre* after a week in which they were dogged by bad luck. They missed the canoes and had to cut back for them. Running a bad rapids, Anne Moline became alarmed and shifted in her seat, rolling the canoe which Tal was poising so carefully into the water. A day later an old beaver-dam which must have been of huge size let go somewhere above them. The river ran a dangerous crest, and behind it came logs and stumps and debris too menacing for a heavily-loaded canoe to ride. They were forced to haul out until the crest was past and the water clear.

Behind them pressed the Blackfeet and Celestine's renegades. Twice from camps on high land they could see the fires of the pursuit behind them. Added to this was the fact that even Satane had ceased to laugh over his wound. It had stiffened him on the second day. As the hours passed it grew more angry and inflamed. More and more often Satane spoke of Mili and *Le Havre.* And the last two days he lay for the most part delirious, calling out the girl's name with a heart-stabbing insistence.

Hastings knew that he should lay up and tend to the wound, giving it a day or so of rest. But he couldn't. Nor was there point in landing, say himself and Satane, and letting the others go on. It would be no help to the wounded man to save him the rigors of travel, only to let him fall into the hands of the wolves behind.

It was with deep relief that he turned the canoes into the landing-place close to the entrance to *Le Havre.* Mili was waiting for them, apparently having watched their approach from the lookout. She ran forward eagerly, but when she saw Anne Moline step from a canoe clinging to Tal's arm, she stopped short, her face clouding. Tal made an awkward introduction. Ignoring Anne, pointedly and haughtily, Mili sepped close to Tal.

"You learn quick about the north!" she said in Shoshone. "Already you take squaws when you go on the war-path!"

She turned then, and started away. Tal ran after her, caught her roughly.

"When I take a squaw, girl," he said sharply, "you'll know about it! Pere's been hurt. He'll be needing you!"

Mili's face went white. She ran swiftly down to the water's edge where Carcajou and one of the others were lifting the wounded trapper ashore. In a moment she was back.

"We'll have to make a stretcher to carry him. And I'll want the cabin clear. There's a man in it, now. I took him prisoner yesterday. He's been demanding to see you."

She turned away abruptly.

Seeing that Carcajou and the two girls could take care of Satane and that the rest of the crew would bring in the gear, Tal went on alone through the tunnel. He found Mili's prisoner very thoroughly bound in a corner of the cabin. The man turned his head as Tal entered. It was Bill Starrett.

"Hastings!" Starrett gasped. "Thank God you're here! I thought you'd be too late. And that black-eyed little devil that dragged me in here wouldn't give me any satisfaction. Who is she?"

"The best legionnaire in *Le Havre!*" Tal said gently, loosing Starrett's hands. "Now, what the thunder you doing up here? I figured you'd be in Laramie with the troop!"

"I would, if the troop had stayed in Laramie, Hastings," the army man said ruefully. "Reckon I'm plain deserted. But so damn much happened and I figured you ought to know. So I broke camp and worked this way, hoping to the devil I'd run across you. That gal saw me from her lookout and leveled a rifle at me down river a ways."

Tal sat down, his brows ridged. "Start slow and at the beginning and let me have it."

"Sure. I left Fort National the morning after Anne and me turned you loose there. When I got to Laramie, I told Lieutenant Cowan I'd seen you and what you said about keeping the troop out of the north. He dismissed me and started to read Ab Moline's letter. And hour later, General Quarters was sounded and he ordered us into trail-kits and marching gear. He drove us all the way to Fort National. When we got there, we found that Moline and Anne had gone north further to McFairn's post. Cowan like to threw a fit at that. I heard him telling Daggett, our quartermaster and second in command, that he was being double-crossed. He pulled out the same day alone for Fort Benedict, ordering Daggett to hold us at Moline's post until he got back.

"That night, all hell hit Fort National. Bunch of pirates, so the talk went. Any rate, they broke in a side gate, turned loose the heaviest firing I ever saw from one little bunch of men, and cleaned out Moline's fur-rooms to the last pelt. The troop, backed up by Moline's men, shot the hell out of them, but they got away. It was as bold and pretty a piece of work as I ever hope to see. Put Daggett in a hell of a fix. Finally, Moline's men raised such a ruckus about their furs that Daggett acted on a basis that United States soldiers had been fired on, and ordered the troop out after them.

"We marched inside a couple of hours and close on their tracks. I know you'd want to know the troop was moving this way. And I had an idea that bunch that we were trailing were your men. So I broke ranks when I got a chance, hit the timber, and pushed on as fast as I could. I passed the raiders night before last. Don't know how much I gained on them after that. But they'll be here any time, now, with the troop right behind them!"

Tal took Starrett's hand, gripped it solidly. "I owe you something for this!" he said gratefully. "We've got a wounded man coming in here. Give me a hand with this cabin. Then we'll call a palaver."

But in the end, Hastings didn't call his council. There was no question of what should be done and nothing to discuss. The thing he had come into the north to avoid was about to happen. If Four Men's victory-maddened Blackfeet met that trail-weary little troop of cavalry, afoot now and under a green junior officer, everything that had happened before would have been wasted. When Pere was bunked down in the cabin to Mili's satisfaction and he was sure there was nothing more to be done for the old trapper for the time being, Tal called Carcajou.

"Get together all the men that Mili can spare. Leave here enough to give her a hand with Satane. See the horns are full and there's shot in the pouches."

Shane shook his head wearily. "We're goin' out ag'in, and with them Blackfeet rollin' south as fast as they can come?"

"We're going out to meet them!" Tal said flatly. "We're going to give 'em hell. Abel's on his way back with his bunch, shot to the devil but loaded down with Moline's fur. We got to keep the entrance to *Le Havre* open for him. And the soldiers are right on his tail. We've got to keep those brass buttons from tangling with Four Men!"

Carcajou shrugged, his eyes twinkling. "Ever hear a gent boast he don't get enough of fighting, I'll sure as hell know who to send him to after this!"

Minutes later, loaded and grim-faced, half a dozen men filed out of *Le Havre,* leaving behind them a wounded man and two women. Both Mili and Anne Moline had scorned masculine help with their patient when guns were so bady needed.

IX

WHEN he reached the river, Tal split his men. Carcajou, Bill Starrett and himself were to work down one side of the river. The other three were to take the far bank.

"There'll be upward of fifty Blackfeet and a dozen of Celestine's Canuks. There's only six of us. But they'll be in canoes, watching for our landing-place. I don't expect us to turn them. But we can slow them up for a spell. Abel and his boys are due in from Fort National any minute. Soon as they show, Mili'll send them out here. We'll have enough guns to do some good with, then. But we've got to stall this attack till they get here. The first six canoes that pass, you boys on the far side take. Empty them as clean as you can. The next six, we'll take. Stagger it that way. If they land, give ground and dig in a new place upriver!"

The six of them parted. Every man knew what he was facing and how the odds stacked. But an eagerness was on every face. Watching them, Tal felt a surge of pride. When the other three had reached the far bank, he started forward with Carcajou and Starrett beside him. In twenty minutes a whistle sounded on the far bank, and in a moment, a fleet of canoes darkened the silver sheen of the river. Squatting in the brush, nerves tight as bow-strings, they waited. Canoes began to pass. When the sixth one had cleared, flame stabbed from the far bank. Havoc suddenly fell among the paddlers in the first craft. The guns spoke again and the second canoe overturned. Then the second section of six was abreast and Tal's fingers curled about his own trigger.

For five minutes they poured a two-sided fire into the confusion among the canoes. Then Four Men was up in the lead, screaming at his men, untangling them and swinging many of the canoes ashore. Answering fire grew stronger. Five canoes landed a few rods below where Tal and his companions crouched. It was time to move. He half-raised. As he did so, Carcajou pointed to a canoe in close to the bank, being driven back downstream by two paddlers. Propped in the bow was a white man.

"Jean Blanchard!" Carcajou whispered. Tal slid toward the water. Blanchard was a big man, in the north or in the whole country. And his reputation for honesty and fair dealing was as widespread as the holdings of his Anglican Fur Company. Tal saw it as part of his job to save the old man's skin. Plunging into the river waist deep, he waded swiftly out toward the canoe. The two Blackfoot paddlers, all that remained of a large crew, turned desperately. One raised a rifle and fired it point-blank at Tal. He felt the slug hit, shaking him. But in a moment he had the gunwhale of the canoe and Bill Starrett, ashore, had cleaned out the two Indians.

The firing drew fresh attention. When Four Men's braves saw that their prisoner was escaping them, they threw a wall of lead against the bank, careless now whether Blanchard was killed or not, so long as those reaching for him were hit. But fantastic luck built up about the three men beaching the canoe. Half submerged in water, they were poor targets. They worked the canoe into a place where brush overhung the water and lifted the old man from where he lay. A swift knife cut his bonds. He came unsteadily to his feet. Starrett and Carcajou Shane each got a shoulder under his arms. With Tal breaking the way, they dropped hurriedly back from the river and worked upstream. Behind them, the firing died out.

A quarter of a mile above where they had first struck, an owl hooted on the far bank. The call was repeated. Cupping his hands, Carcajou sent a passable imitation back in answer.

"The other boys," he said shortly. "Just lettin' us know we was opposite 'em and set for another brace against them red devils."

"No sign of Stone and his boys?" Tal grunted. Carcajou spat and dropped a ball into his rifle ahead of the ramrod.

"If'n Abel was in a couple of miles and heard that owl, he'd a done what I did. You'd a thought this was owl heaven for all the birds in it. Abel just ain't showed, boy. That's all!"

Moments later the brush rattled behind them. Tal jerked his gun up, centering something less than a shadow leaping across a little open. A man threw up his hands and landed heavily. Tal's shot drew a vicious answering fire, centering on the

flash of his gun. Lead winged sharply into the brush where he crouched with the others. Carcajou swore sharply. Tal jerked his head around.

"Damn splinter off'n a saplin' in my neck!" Shane whispered. "Hurt, that's all."

Tal thought about his own wound. It pulled at his left arm, heavily. Apparently a hole through the muscle just outside his upper ribs. He saw that Starrett was fingering a wet place on the sleeve of his uniform. The brush crackled again and Carcajou fired. Another man went down. Across the river a stray shot snapped out and a Blackfoot screamed his peculiar high death-cry.

They were making their lead count. But there weren't enough of them and there wasn't enough lead.

HE shifted position, moving up with Carcajou and Starrett still piloting old Blanchard. He waited a little longer, hoping to hear a rallying call from up the river. But it didn't come. Shrugging, finally, he spoke in Carcajou's ear.

"We aren't magicians!" he snapped. "It's like trying to stop a spring thaw. We'd better slide or they'll get us and there won't be anything between them and those two girls!"

At his side, Bill Starrett breathed a big sigh. "I was wondering when you'd think of that!" he said. "Why, I didn't even get a chance to talk to Anne!"

"Let the boys across know if you can, Carcajou," Tal went on.

The old trapper crept down to the water. A moment later the loud slap of a beaver's tail sounded. Tal had used that signal, himself. Loosely, it meant danger. But the boys across the river would catch on, all right. The brush was alive with Blackfeet. Tal grew impatient for Carcajou's return. But the trapper didn't come back. Cautiously, Tal followed after him. A pair of yards from the river bank, he stopped. Carcajou was working toward him. Behind the king of the woods-runners an overturned canoe lay on the wet shingle. And over its upper edge, two pairs of legginged legs were dangling. Carcajou thrust a long, wide-bladed knife into Tal's hand.

"Last time you saw it, it was ag'in my belly!" he said grimly. "It's Celestine's. Take it back to Mili!"

Tal doubled back toward where he had left Starrett and Jean Blanchard. Carcajou stayed silently beside him. When he spoke again, his voice was almost soundless.

"Celestine and one of his renegades had that canoe in the bush right beside me when I made that signal on the water. They jumped me quick, all right, but I'm a mite nervous tonight. Its possible neither one knowed jest where the knife that got 'em come from. I got a notion Four Men'll find them outlaw *voyaguers* won't stick to him, now. A renegade of any breed's got to have a leader or he'll run like hell!"

Tal's lips parted grimly. Carcajou had a thorough way of paying off a score! It was good to know, too, that Celestine was out of the way. It made the count a little less top-heavy. For six men, his party had done what it could.

"Break for the tunnel!" he breathed. "And make it fast!"

For a few minutes it looked as if the Blackfeet had them circled. Across the river, the three on the far bank had to shoot themselves out of a corner, plunging into the water in a churning, reckless crossing. But they made it and in moments the seven of them were running together toward the clump of brush which hid *Le Havre's* gate. Not far behind them but still on the river, the battle-fired warriors of Four Men's band were keeping in deadly pursuit. Tal leaped ahead to jerk the brush aside over the tunnel opening and rammed full onto the muzzles of a pair of rifles in the hands of two troopers of the United States Cavalry, at sentry-go in the tunnel mouth!

X

TAL'S momentum carried him hard against the guns. With swift, down-striking hands, he swept one of the barrels to each side of him, plowing on between the two surprised troopers. At the same instant, one of the two fired his piece. Tal felt the sear of its charge along his thigh. Then he laced out with his fist, tagged the point of a jaw, and dropped his man. Carcajou came in from the side, his great long arms wrapping the other

sentry tight. Bill Starrett jerked the man's belt-gun and laid him beside his fellow with a quick, sure pass of the short barrel.

Scattered, sporadic firing echoed down the tunnel from the bowl of *Le Havre*. It was plain what was afoot. Weary and hard-pressed, Abel Stone had reached the hideout with his stolen furs with the cavalry troop right behind him. They had plunged on through the tunnel, leaving these sentries behind, to wipe out the pirates they had chased so far. The fact that they had finally overtaken the wily, woods-wise Stone was evidence that Daggett, the quartermaster, commanding in Jackie Cowan' absence, was a better officer than Cowan had ever been. Tal smiled grimly. There were many things he had learned in his weeks in the north. But few of them brought him the satisfaction this item did. He drew his tiny crew close in the end of the tunnel.

"Make all the hell you can when we hit the bowl ahead!" he snapped. "Sound like seventy instead of seven. Burn plenty of powder, but throw your shots wide. Don't tag any of the troopers unless they turn on us. We'll need them! We've got them from behind, now, and Abel's likely across the bowl behind the cabin. Maybe we can make them think they're caught in a trap!"

The weary men at Tal's back seemed to find fresh energy from hidden reservoirs. Old Jean Blanchard snatched up the rifle of one of the downed sentries. When they had raced the length of the tunnel and belched out into *Le Havre's* bowl, he was howling like a drunken Piegan. The uproar issuing without warning from the sounding-board of the tunnel struck the line of soldiers advancing cautiously across the bowl like an unexpected artillery barrage. Some of them wheeled and dropped, defensively. The majority froze where they stood, caught short and waiting for a command. At their head, two men jerked around. Almost at the same instant, Starrett and Tal both grunted identification of one of them.

"Cowan!"

The other was Ed Moline. Tal's mind stabbed this development into the swiftly-forming pattern of events. Moline and Jackie Cowan, working south after their escape from the destruction of Fort Benedict, must have stumbled into the troop, under the quartermaster, somewhere out in the basin. It made matters a little different to have Cowan back in command. Being implicated with Moline and the dead McFairn in their wild plan for an empire in the fur country, the discredited officer was apt to be desperate, ordering his men to make a stand against any odds.

But Tal was reasoning without the strain to which Cowan had been subject on his flight south with the wild-eyed, moody Moline. Drawing his saber and reversing it so that he could hold its hilt high in plain sight, he screamed at his own men and Tal's party alike.

"Down guns! We surrender! Truce!"

Firing died. Tal held his men back until Abel's larger party from the upper end of the bowl had moved down among the soldiers. Then he swung his few forward, the danger of exposing their small number past. Abel Stone's men made quick work of disarming Cowan and Ed Moline. From the cabin in the center of the bowl, two girls ran swiftly. The first was Anne Moline, running brokenly toward the knot of men about her father. Bill Starrett angled across to shoulder a way through the press for her. The other was Mili, racing across the uneven ground like a deer, her raven hair trailing unnoticed behind her, her face white with concern.

Tal saw old Jean Blanchard drop the gun in his hand and start forward. Then, apparently seeing the look on the girl's face and the concern in her eyes, the old fur-lord fell back. Mili came on, her arms out in unashamed eagerness. Tal absorbed her rush, sweeping her close to him.

"Tal! Tal!" she sobbed, pressing herself tighter in his arms as if her intensity could tell him of fears and relief she couldn't voice. She felt him flinch where her shoulder touched the wound along his ribs. The sobs died and she jerked back.

"Cher ami! You are killed!"

A small grin parted Tal's lips. "Not yet, little one," he said softly. "I'm still on my feet!"

"Oh!" Life flowed back into the girl with that sigh.

"How's Pere?" Time was running short. Tal spoke swiftly.

Mili shook her head.

"But he hangs on, Tal. He wants to see you—after the guns are quiet!"

"But a little while, then, girl. Tell him to keep hanging on. It'll be over shortly!"

Mili turned back to the cabin. Tal raised his voice, calling for Abel Stone, Carcajou and Bill Starrett. Starrett he sent among the troopers with orders to get them up on the slopes to either side of the tunnel. In open shooting, such as was coming in the bowl of *Le Havre,* the cavalry would be far from the helpless men they were out in the deep timber. Stone he sent to round up the brotherhood and brace them at the upper end of *Le Havre.* Carcajou and himself took corners of the cabin, ready to turn the Blackfeet away from the two women, the two prisoners, and the wounded men who were within it.

All of these things took brief moments which ran together into quick flash of time. Then a roar came out of the tunnel, and after it, the red, relentless tide of Four Men's warriors. They poured into the bowl, widened, and bounded forward toward the position taken up by Abel Stone's command. As the last of them loped out of the tunnel, a squad of the troopers dropped down, closing off their escape. A party of them, headed by Four Men, himself, ran sharply toward the cabin in the center of the open. It was like the wily old chief to realize that in this shelter were the things his enemy wanted most to protect.

Knowing the old Piegan chief to be a reasonable man, and knowing his power over his band, Tal was unwilling to shoot him down without giving him his chance. Motioning Carcajou to cover the far side in case some of the rest circled, he stepped clear of the cabin and flung his hands up in quick, chopping sign-language call for truce and parley. Four Men stopped for a moment in indecision. Then, pressed from behind by his younger men, he leaped forward again, throwing up his rifle as he ran.

THE weapon blossomed flame. Tal felt the hard slam of the slug as it touched his shoulder in passing. He pulled the trigger of the hand-gun he held ready. Four Men ran half a dozen paces more, dropped his rifle, stumbled, and rolled almost to Tal's feet. At the upper end of the bowl, Stone gave an order and a terrible volley of lead swept *Le Havre.* That happened twice. Leaderless, the Blackfeet wheeled like a drilled company and raced toward the tunnel. But Starrett and the troopers were ready. A wall of fire smashed into the Indians, turning them. They made another wild dash, trying to cut through the pall of powdersmoke hanging like a curtain before the tunnel-mouth. Then a secondary chief threw down his rifle. The Blackfeet followed to a man, and firing ceased in the little haven as swiftly as it had begun.

Wearily Tal turned toward the door of the cabin. Pere had wanted to see him when the guns were silent. Mili opened the door. She spoke sharply to the two prisoners. Anne Moline took her father's arm, guiding him to the door. As Cowan stepped into the open, following them, Bill Starrett appeared at Tal's elbow and glanced inquiringly toward the cowed, white-faced officer. Tal nodded.

"Name a police detail and put him under arrest, Corporal," he said quietly. Starrett's heels came together sharply. His hand clipped the side of his hatless head.

"Yes sir!"

Tal stepped into the cabin. Mili caught up his hand, led him across to where Pere Satane lay on a bunk. One look at the old *voyaguer's* face was enough. There was nothing in it, now. Even the flush of raging fever was gone. Only his eyes were alive and the shadows of the Divide were gathering in their depths. There is little a man can say to a dying friend. Tal lifted Satane's hand. A faint pressure ran through the limp fingers.

"The last trail, *mon ami,*" the trapper breathed. "Now I go back to the book I t'row away. No matter. Pere is lak the she-wolf. With her back broke she stay wit' her cubs till they are weaned. Then she crawl in the hole and she die. Long tam I wait for Mili's *beau-brave.* Long tam I make prayer. *Voila!* You come. Is finish, now. . . ."

Satane caught his breath. For a moment longer his eyes held to Tal's face, seeming to pass on with their fading look his devotion to the girl he had stolen from the Blackfeet. Tal's arm slid around Mili's shoulders. The breath eased from Satane and he was dead. Tal turned Mili, walked

slowly with her to the door. Carcajou met them there.

"I've got Four Men propped up around the corner, Tal," Shane said urgently, "and he wants to make palaver!"

Moving stiffly, aware of his wounds and in crying need of rest, Tal rounded the cabin with Mili at his side. The oldPiegan chief was braced up in state. Five or six of his younger aides were at his feet. Bill Starrett and Anne Moline stood a little distance away. Old Jean Blanchard was crouched close to Four Men. The Indian waved a feeble hand to Mili, beckoning her close beside him. Tal followed.

"Old men must talk before they can die," Four Men said slowly. "The years weigh down their souls with many things. Hear me. When I was a young war-maker, the first whites came among us in their search for furs. I saw in my mind's eye a coming time when there would be many whites and no redmen. When that time came, my nation must fight or make a shrewd trade. Therefore, I took a party to the lodge of the greatest of the fur-men and stole a girl-child from him. I kept her many years against the day when the fur man and the chief of the Blackfeet met in parley. I kept her as a hostage for the land the whites would take from my people.

"Three seasons past, she was stolen from me by a woods-runner who kept her as his own daughter. Four Men made many attempts to take her back, and failed. Now the Blackfoot nation is defeated and their chief dies. Four Men desires to return the girl to the lodge of her father—here!"

The old Indian's hand reached out; stabbing a finger at Jean Blanchard. The owner of the great Anglican company came slowly to his feet. Puzzled, tremulous, Mili also stood up. Blanchard took her hand.

"Daughter!" he said hoarsely. Then he was more gentle, carefully holding in check the strong emotion pulling at his face. "I've known since I first saw you, Mili Blanchard!"

Watching the two of them, Tal saw that he, too, should have known. The strong, clear-cut features and the devil-fired jet eyes were common to them both. Mili went to the old man with uncertain eagerness, needing his comfort to fill the void left by the death of Pere Satane. From Blanchard's arms she sent a blinding, happy smile across to Tal. The Anglican owner spoke again.

"Now I want the ears of everyone. Presently I will have words for Four Men's Blackfeet. But first, for the brotherhood gathered here. There are many things I know. First, I heard, late last fall, whispers of a scheme of lawless empire in these woods. One of my posts, Fort Benedict, was involved. My factor was apparently a ring-leader. I appealed to the Army of the United States. They agreed to send their detachment at Fort Laramie out to investigate. I protested that the detachment was too small and untrained in woods-war. I protested that the young, pig-headed junior lieutenant in command at Laramie appeared to be a party to my factor's plans. The Army told me they had no other force available, but that they would send one man into the north. I laughed. But I laughed too soon, gentlemen. That man was Captain Tallant Hastings!"

THE eyes of the whole company swung toward Tal. Some in amazement. Some in pleasure. Corporal Starrett grinned knowing pride and tightened his grip around Anne Moline's shoulders. Tal was uncomfortable. Blanchard seemed to sense this.

"Captain Hastings chose to gather the free-trade to break up this threatening empire. He was wise enough to know that only the trappers themselves would be able to defeat the forces moving against them. The brotherhood of *Le Havre* will be long remembered. For with it, the Captain has been able to win a peace for us all. Even for the Blackfeet." He stopped, turning to Carcajou. "Tell Four Men that I have many posts, but that his people have only one hunting-ground. I am going down-river with my daughter when Captain Hastings returns Lieutenant Cowan to Leavenworth for trial. I will probably return alone. But I'll not rebuild Fort Benedict. The territory once controlled by that post I give to the Piegan chief in return for my daughter!"

Carcajou translated Blanchard's words to Four Men with a stiff-necked dignity which implied it was he, Carcajou Shane,

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woods-runner, who made this generous treaty. Four Men's eyes kindled but his face was graven.

"It is a good land. My people are grateful. The Piegan is a worthy enemy. He is a better friend. So long as honor lives among us, there will be peace in the northland!"

Tal Hastings stirred. A heavy weight slid from his shoulders. He smiled and started toward Mili and her father. No history book would ever record this peace. It was without formality, without foolscap, ink, and quill. But it would hold with the most impressive. In following years, when the expanding nation reached into the north and government came with it, statesmen would write a new treaty at oak tables. Yet, when the new was written, it would hold nothing not already sworn to, here.

Carcajou Shane shuffled into his path.

"Damn!" he said with mock bitterness. "I've lived half a life on the practice that a dead Blackfoot was somethin' to be proud of. I was plumb enjoyin' watchin' that old devil, Four Men, fadin' out like a wet fire. Then Blanchard give him that land and he right quick started burnin' ag'in. He'll be on his feet in a week! And I'll have to git me a new mark to practice my shootin'-eye on. There ain't a crooked bone in that old Piegan's body. What he says, he'll stick to. Be no sport in meetin' a Blackfoot on a trail no more!"

Tal grinned, slapped Carcajou's shoulder with the affection of a man who has been through a high-water hell with another. Bill Starrett and Anne Moline came up before he left the old trapper.

"Think I might get a discharge from the service, Cap'n?" Starrett asked.

Tal looked from the trooper to the girl and back again. His eyes danced.

"For good cause, possibly," he agreed.

Starrett missed the humor in his eagerness. "I've got that—Anne! We've got to get her father out of the north and down on the Big River where he can rest up and get free of the strain that's cracked him. We aim to find a preacher, down there. Then we want to come back to Fort National and run it right. We want to give up keeping it a strictly Yankee Company post. Thought we'd widen out and open it to the free-traders. They take more fur than company men, any day, and fur is a trader's business!"

Tal saw Carcajou's seamed face split into a wide grin. The free-trade was to have a post in the north! That meant something to the disbanding brotherhood. Tal nodded to Starrett.

"You and Carcajou get together and sort out the take we brought in here. Blanchard won't want any part of those bales we took from McFairn. That'll give you a good start. You might put Shane in charge of your post till you got back. He'd have it purring like a big cat for you when you and Anne came up-river."

Anne Moline nodded. "It'll take time to get father well, to cure his mind. We may be delayed a season. I had thought of Mister Shane. If he would. . . ."

"If he would!" Carcajou shouted. "Ma'm, give me room! I'm an old mountain-man with a belly full of war and a hankerin' to settle down!"

Tal drew away. Mili saw him coming and moved out to meet him.

"*Capitaine* it is, now, eh?" she teased. "Maybe when I am an old woman I will like that. But for now, you will be always by my *boucanier,* my fur-pirate!"

Together they walked down toward the little river which ran through *Le Havre.* They said nothing more. Presently Mili began to sing:

"Some are dead young—
Some are dead old—
We live forever . . .!

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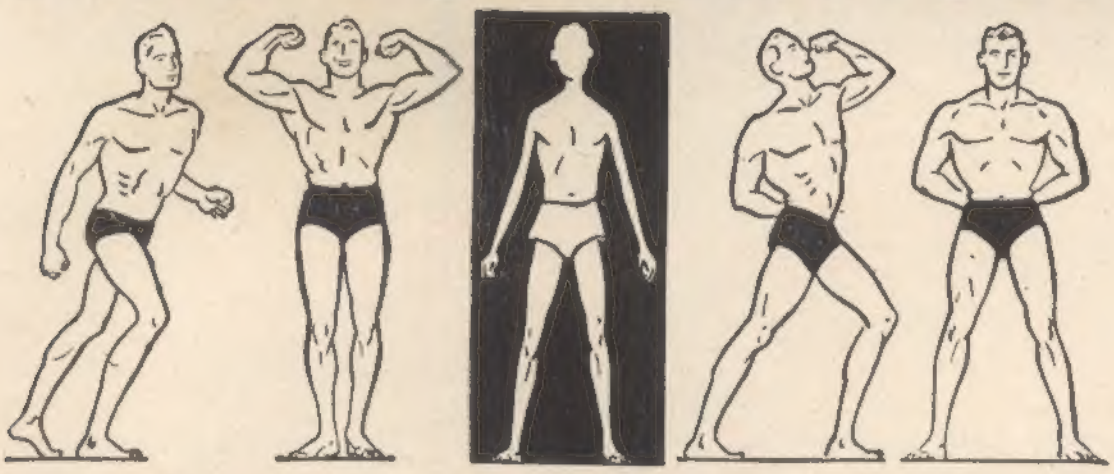

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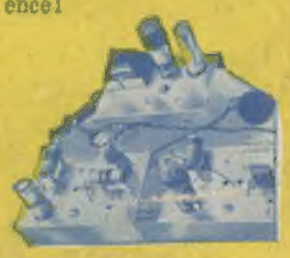

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